

JOE LANSDALE interviewed

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THE WORLD OF  
**DARKNESS**





Summer 1996

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## THE OWL'S NEST

### So, where have we been?

It has been almost a year since our last issue, a circumstance we are not proud of. The truth of the matter is that since then the magazine has been sitting around looking for the money and opportunity to publish another issue. This problem has been solved, so here we are. We regret that we haven't been able to stay on schedule since 1991, which was the last time we actually published four issues of *Weird Tales*® in a year. But that was five years ago, and here we are. We are proud of our ability to survive. Times have been tough for small magazines, with the costs of paper and postage rising astronomically. Many have failed. Many more have become irregular, as *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror* has, but we think that what matters is survival. We're heartened to learn that our colleague Charles Ryan will have a new issue of *Aboriginal SF* out by the time you read this, after a hiatus of nearly two years. *Pulphouse* comes out whenever *Pulphouse* comes out, and we're always glad to see it, but we never know when to expect the next one. All of us are members of the Survivors Club.

We hope to continue publishing the magazine three times a year, with the next issue in the summer of 1996. Remember, in any case, that your subscription is for a number of issues, not a period of time, so you won't miss anything, no matter what happens. Please bear with us.

We continue this editorial with a filing accident: every time we go to write one of these pieces, we reach for the "Eyre" file — still called that, after the editorial-and-letters section in a Certain Other Magazine with a Large W in the Title, which we used to edit — which contains assorted notes and, most especially, letters of comment from you, the readers, which not only count for the Most Popular Story voting each issue, but sometimes spark the editorials themselves.

(Yes! We really do want to hear from you!)

This time we discovered that half the letters had been inadvertently slipped into the "Nut Case" file which had been placed right next to the "Eyre" file. The "Nut Case" file is something, we assure you, every editor and publisher has. It contains the angry and argumentative replies to rejections, occasional threats, and just plain strangeness which accumulates at any editorial office like so much flotsam. It is *not* a

"blacklist" but merely something we keep for our own reference, in case one of those problematical people writes in again. Then, at least, we have the whole "case history" on hand.

No, we're not going to quote anything from that file. It remains strictly private. But, it so happened that in order to separate out the "Eyre" letters from the less desirable ones, we had to go through and reread them all.

Fortunately the "Nut Case" file is very thin and shows no sign of getting any fatter. But the experience did cause us to reflect a bit on what it means to be a writer, particularly a magazine writer, the sort who submits stories to *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror*.

There are three Rules for being a writer: First, you must write. Second, you must write well. Third, you must behave like a writer.

The first is obvious enough. There are a lot of people who talk about the great stories they'll write someday, if only they can find the time. When we were in college, it was still fashionable for literary intellectuals to be "working on a novel." We're not sure if that is still the fashion — possibly they're "working on a screenplay" these days — but we are certain that we never saw any of those novels in print. As magazine editors, we never see any of the great stories folks will write whenever they finally find the time, because those stories never do get written. So, Rule #1 is self-explanatory and self-correcting.

The second is the crux of the matter. You must write well. At this point you may expect us to give you an objectively verifiable definition of "good writing," which is of course impossible, but we're going to let you in on a little secret. There are certain criteria all editors agree upon. After a while, an experienced editorial reader can detect a potentially publishable story as easily as one can tell if the water's warm by dipping a foot in it.

You know immediately if the prose is literate, if the scenes are in focus, if there is dramatic development, and if the dialogue sounds like people talking. Most stories that get rejected are rejected not because they didn't, as the phrase has it, "meet the magazine's present needs." Instead, they are rejected for other reasons than for failing to conform to editorial policy (in the sense that *Analog*, a hardcore, science-fiction

magazine, does not publish ghost stories and will therefore turn down a ghost story, no matter how well-written) or even for failing to match the idiosyncratic personal taste of the editor.

Many rejected stories are simply not written well enough to be published anywhere, under any circumstances, unless subsidized by the person who wrote it. This fact should encourage writers: if your story is of publishable quality, and it doesn't happen to "fit the needs" of one magazine, it will almost certainly fit the needs of another. We now live in a golden age of small-press, bookstore-distributed magazines. There are more magazine markets for all kinds of short fiction than there have been since the pre-television era of the 1940s, when pulp magazines proliferated. So, hang in there. Persistence pays off for stories of publishable quality.

You must write well. The important thing is that your story be gripping, amusing, emotionally moving, or whatever it sets out to be. The crucial thing is to be entertaining enough that someone who is an absolute stranger to the author will want to pay money to read it. If you write well enough, there are no obsolete ideas. Sure, we at *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* are tired of stories about re-animated roadkill, or desperately romantic/tragic/decadent vampires. We also dislike mock-medieval fantasies which merely rehash parts of old rôle-playing games or even older fantasy novels. But this doesn't mean that we never buy stories about vampires, wizards, or even (should someone happen to surprise us with a sufficiently good one) roadkill.

The key to writing a good story is having something unique and important to say. It's not just a matter of the money. If you think you can just toss together a few clichés and collect a check, even if you're right, consider the following: If you're very successful and sell five stories that are 5,000 words long to major markets within your first year, you have made a cool \$1500 there. (At 6 cents a word, the common professional rate, that's \$300 per story.) Now, suppose you do even better and sell your first novel to a paperback house for a typical first-novel advance of, say, \$4000 . . . well, you see where this is heading. Don't quit your day job.

Writing — being a writer — is a way of life. The being a writer part is actually quite distinct from putting words on paper. That is what the dozen or so people — out of the thousands and thousands who have submitted stories to us over the years — did so badly that they ended up in the "Nut Case" file.

The worst thing you can possibly do is to open your author-editor dialogue with a threat. It usually goes something like this: "My story is copyrighted. Don't you dare steal my ideas or else I'll sue!" Magazine editors don't steal stories from writers, and especially not from previously unpublished writers. That would drive away writers (who are much more valuable the second, and third, and . . . time around), and without writers — well, it's another deeply held secret in this business that blank pages don't sell. Ideas, incidentally,

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## MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS:

Before sending us your material, please ask for our guidelines, which we will send you if you send us a business-sized envelope, with postage affixed, addressed to you.

Yes; we read unsolicited submissions — but only if they are in standard manuscript format. To survive, all editors insist on a few Rules: each submission must be in proper format and must include a return envelope, addressed to you, with enough postage affixed to bring the manuscript back to you. If you want us to discard the manuscript if we don't buy it, tell us so, but include a business-letter-sized envelope, addressed to you, with proper postage affixed, so we can send you our comments. No loose stamps, please!

We recommend either of two books on writing (after all, we wrote one of them): *On Writing Science Fiction: the Editors Strike Back!* by Scithers, Schweitzer, & John M. Ford; \$19.50 in hardcovers; and Barry B. Longyear's *Science-Fiction Writer's Workshop*, \$9.50 in trade paperback, available from the Owlswick Press, 123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia PA 19406-2570. These prices include shipping & handling; in Pennsylvania, please include 6% sales tax.

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are free. No one owns them. Many anthologies are assembled by editors who give the same idea to *all* the writers involved, and those writers then write enough distinctly different stories to fill a book.

The paranoid who threatens to sue before the editor even reads the first page merely guarantees that no prudent editor will ever read the first page.

The next worst thing you can do is argue about a rejection.

Don't.

Ever.

You have everything to lose and nothing to gain. The editor is not going to change his mind and buy the story after all. You may well make yourself a memorable nuisance and bias him against future submissions. If you think the editor is wrong, the only way to prove him so is by selling the story elsewhere. If you try, but fail, do consider the possibility that he may be *right*.

A surprising number of Nut Case letters argue about format, often using decidedly eccentric spelling and grammar to do so. Content is what matters, they say; and they go on to claim that a real editor can see through the red ink on orange paper, the faded, single-spaced, draft-mode, dot-matrix printing, the smeared carbon-copy manuscript (which may be on both sides of onion-skin paper), or even the author's crabbled handwriting to discover a brilliant gem of artistic beauty. . . . Don't bet on it; editors survive only by insisting that stories be submitted in a form that the editors can evaluate and can typeset if bought.

See how easy it is to be a writer? All you have to do is avoid being a Nut Case, follow a few simple rules, and let your writing speak for itself. Go back to Rule 2. Concentrate on that. Rules 1 and 3 tend to take care of themselves.

But *why*? You're not likely to get rich this way, particularly at the start. We (or, one of us, Darrell Schweitzer) have interviewed many writers, in the course of which such writers often make statements about "it beats working" or that they're in it for the money. But when probed a bit, the subject will usually admit that, if he or she were independently wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of avarice, had no responsibilities and all the time in the world, but *would not get paid for writing*, he or she would in fact continue writing. Possibly not the same things, but something. More short fiction. More poetry. Less journalism. But *writers* will keep on writing anyway, because they have something to say, or something to create, which simply would not get said or created otherwise.

Literature then, like virtue, is its own reward. That being said, writers like to get paid, and should get paid, but getting paid isn't the first purpose of writing. It actually *doesn't beat working*. It's a lot harder than working. But, in several ways, it also "pays" a lot better too!

It is indeed possible to *write* without managing to be a *writer*. Emily Dickinson accomplished this most notably. All her success was posthumous — which is no

fun at all. To be *published*, one must also put your work before someone who might buy it, and present it in a form that can be evaluated and used.

#### Obituaries.

**Karl Edward Wagner**, innovative editor of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, celebrated author of the revolutionary "Kane" series of sword-and-sorcery stories, and of some of the finest modern horror fiction (collected in two books, *In a Lonely Place* and *Why Not You and I?*) died last October, shortly after we wrote the previous editorial. The appalling thing was that he was only 48. He should have been with us for many more years to come. He will be sorely missed. We devoted a special issue of *Weird Tales* to Karl's unique talent back in 1989.

**Stanley McNeil**, whose poetry graced our pages as recently as *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* #1, died in early April 1995. He was 77. Two of our editors (Darrell Schweitzer and Diane Weinstein) remain ever grateful to the redoubtable Don Herron for taking us to meet Mr. McNeil when we were in California in 1993.

Stan McNeil was a wit, scholar, and gentleman, a performing poet who could recite everything from bawdy limericks to very fine, fantastic verse off the top of his head. His own eerie work is mostly to be found in his 1965, Arkham House book, *Something Breathing*, which was also reprinted in 1987 by another publisher.

**Editorial book reviews.** Among our recent reading, we particularly recommend:

**Lord Dunsany, Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination** by S.T. Joshi. Greenwood Press, 1995. 230 pp., \$55.00. For years to come, we suspect, this will be the definitive study of the great Irish fantasist and his work. Dunsany (1878-1957) is often cited merely as an influence on Lovecraft, Leiber, and some others, but he should be appreciated as a great fantasist in his own right. It is unfortunate that most of his work is currently unavailable. Nevertheless, Joshi's book is an illuminating guide to the entire body of the author's work. Joshi's own training in classics and philosophy stands him in good stead, as he convincingly reveals depths and subtleties in Dunsany's work which many readers may not have suspected were there; he shows the continuing and coherent development of Dunsany's thought.

The steep cover price will probably restrict this book to university libraries, but seek it out. The highest compliment one can pay to a work of criticism is that it illuminates its subject. This does.

**100 Wild Little Weird Tales** edited by Robert Weinberg, Stefan R. Dziemianowicz, & Martin Greenberg. Barnes & Noble Books, 1994, 581 pp., No price listed. Look for this one in the "instant remainder" section of Barnes & Noble bookstores, where it is

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by the Editors



usually priced at about \$10.00. This is a fine collection of the often neglected shorter fiction published in the back of each issue of *Weird Tales*'s original incarnation. Some big names are here: Lovecraft, Wellman, Clark Ashton Smith, and Fritz Leiber, but so are dozens of hitherto unreprinted tales by forgotten writers.

**Towing Jehovah** by James Morrow. Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1994. 371 pp., \$23.95. For sheer audacity, this satirical fantasy can't be beat. A disgraced oil-tanker captain is offered his old ship back, and a chance at redemption, if only he will fulfill a mysterious mission. . . . It seems God has actually died and been found floating in the Atlantic Ocean. The Corpse must be towed to its final resting place in the Arctic before It starts to rot. Plots and counterplots thicken as atheists, feminists, and even the Vatican attempt to sabotage the mission. And were the angels who commissioned this acting on orders or not?

Morrow, the World Fantasy Award winning author of *Only Begotten Daughter* and other novels, is a wonderful writer whose work everyone should discover. What impresses us the most about *Towing Jehovah* is that, while it is comedy, it isn't farce. This is comedy with substance, with real characters who hurt and die, about whom we can care. Morrow shares the gift of T.H. White in his ability to use comedy as an approach to very serious, often very dark material.

**The Sixth Dog** by Jane Rice. Necronomicon Press, 1995. 28 pp., \$4.95. For decades, Jane Rice (no, not the same as *Anne Rice*!) has been one of the enigmas of our field. She published a dozen or so marvelous stories in the celebrated pulp magazine *Unknown Worlds* in the 1940s, and two more in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in the '50s. Her fiction has never been collected into a book. A few of the stories, particularly "The Idol of the Flies," have been repeatedly anthologized. No reference book in the field seems to contain any data about her. Your editor was once contemplating writing an article entitled "Who Was Jane Rice?" and asked various senior figures this very question, and drew a blank.

So it is something of a surprise that Ms. Rice should re-enter the field after nearly forty years. *The Sixth Dog* is not some old manuscript now unearthed, but a new story — and it's good. It's an intriguing portrait of Southern small-town life, its odd characters and not-quite-ordinary goings-on, which gradually turn more sinister. We now inevitably wonder what Jane Rice has been doing all these years. Certainly her very special talent remains undiminished.

#### Letters from Our Readers.

Several people wrote in to praise the resplendent Jason Van Hollander cover last issue. Many asked how such realistic effects were achieved. "Wow!" wrote Lelia Loban Lee. "Everything he does looks as if it's moving." There are two possible explanations. One is

that Jason Van Hollander is a superbly talented artist who gets such astonishing results from a combination of painting and computer technology (specifically a Macintosh program called Adobe Photoshop). The other is that, like Lovecraft's Richard Upton Pickman, he uses *photographs from life!!!!* (At least four exclamation points required.) That is, he simply got real ghosts to pose. We leave you to figure out which.

Author Charles de Lint sent in the following clarification of a point raised in the interview with him last issue: "Because of the long time-lag between when the interview was conducted and its seeing print, the impression is given that I'm unhappy with the Tor cover for *Svaha*, which is far from the case. I hadn't seen the Tor cover at the time of the interview and was speaking of the original Ace cover. I love the Tor cover."

S.T. Joshi's column drew considerable attention, including commentary in other magazines. In his newsletter *Horror*, John Betancourt devoted an article to advising small-press publishers how to avoid the sort of production errors Joshi berated.

On this point, Michael Thomas Dillon injects a cautionary note. . . . it seemed unfair to assume that [Lucy] Taylor was responsible for the grammatical errors [Joshi] cites, when the editor could just as easily be the culprit. . . . I also disagree with his thumbs-up for Partridge's novel *Slippin' into Darkness*. It's the first novel I've read in a good many years, admittedly, but it's still hard to believe I could be so wrong about it. To me, it was boring, made promises of supernatural goings-on that never came to light, and was easier to put down than a hot piece of coal. The theme of guilt ruining people's lives was far from original, as was the reason for the guilt. A shame, because I generally like his [i.e., Norman Partridge's] short stories and was quite disappointed."

#### The Most Popular Story.

Once again, the voting is very light. The winner seems to be "When Desert Spirits Crowd the Night" by Charles de Lint. There aren't enough votes to clearly rank the runners-up. (No kidding, folks. We really do want to hear from you!) De Lint's "The Forever Trees" and Lord Dunsany's "The Story of Tse Gah" also drew notable praise.

#### Coming soon in WoF&H.

We have recently acquired several exciting stories which will be printed as soon as possible, including a novelet, "Teatro Grottesco," by one of the horror field's true originals, Thomas Ligotti, and a triptych of linked stories by Tanith Lee, "The Sequence of Swords and Hearts." We are negotiating for more rare, hitherto unknown stories by Lord Dunsany, and have on hand a long and grim tale, "The Bible in Blood," and a shorter and surprising one, "My Vampire Cake," both by Ian Watson. We also have stories by Melanie Tem, R. Brettnor, Darrell Schweitzer, R. Chetwynd-Hayes, and several new talents we've discovered. Ω

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# SHADOWINGS

## by Douglas E. Winter



### FINDING MY RELIGION

*... it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and the Pacific of one's being alone.*

— Henry David Thoreau

During a recent interview for a documentary on low-budget filmmaking, I was asked an innocuous and perhaps inevitable question: Do I prefer supernatural horror or psychological horror?

The answer surprised the interviewer, and may surprise some readers:

I don't think there is a difference.

I've devoted the better part of my writing life to knocking down the fences of categorization, and certainly the impulse to reject such broadbrush distinctions as supernatural/psychological (or quiet/loud) informs my thinking. But I find no rational split between "supernatural" and "psychological" for the simple reason that there is no such difference in our daily lives. And since fiction is a mirror, however warped, of our existence, then there is no useful purpose (save for marketing and mind-numbing criticism-by-numbers) for dividing up sides this way.

Consider: The "real" world mimicked by fiction is a supernatural one. Even if written by an atheist, a story must acknowledge that our world is filled with people who believe, principally through religion, in the existence of the supernatural. Our world is also not entirely explicable; it is filled with mysteries that aren't all capable of purely psychological solutions. Thus the "real" world includes, at the very least, the possibility of the supernatural, if not the supernatural itself. And any "psychological" fiction set in that world is thus, to my mind, supernatural — just as any effective "supernatural" fiction is undoubtedly psychological, for what is horror but an emotion, a state of mind?

Ironically, a hard look at most "supernatural" horror stories reveals them to be "psychological" fictions that

have as much to do with the supernatural as hard science fiction. Contrary to popular belief, the typical vampire is not a supernatural creature, but a logic-bound construct who exists (and desists), by easily explicable — and natural — rules. Burial soil, crucifixes, garlic at the window, the need for blood: all hallmarks of a natural (if not necessarily human) being; Ed Gein, an icon of "psychological" horror, is much more difficult to comprehend. The traditional werewolf is the better example: A hirsute Mr. Hyde, the overtly physical manifestation of the beast within — not at all different from a run-of-the-mill psychotic killer. That you might need silver bullets instead of hollow points to drop him is irrelevant. We may as well argue that an alligator is supernatural; the only difference is that some of us have actually seen live alligators. In other words, vampires and werewolves are imaginary monsters, but not imaginary theosophies, ways of explaining, in direct terms, the dilemma of our existence.

When presented with a creature — whether vampire or gator — the question is not whether the creature does exist or could exist. The question should be: What does the creature represent?

Or better yet, the one so rarely asked: What does the creature believe?

Which, in turn, leads us to the more important question: What do we believe?

We think of "religion" as another box to be checked on the form, right after male or female, single or married, Caucasian or African-American or Native American or Pacific Rim American or Other. What will it be . . . Baptist, Catholic, Adventist, Buddhist, Athe-

ist? In other words, we think of religion in organized terms, as a rigid system of beliefs that can be packaged and marketed as "Lutheran" as neatly as a kind of fiction can be packaged and marketed as "Horror."

Wrong. And that kind of thinking leads to quick denials, and to more dividing lines: pro-this, anti-that, religious right, godless left.

The Bible is the best selling book of the Western world, and whatever we might think of it (or the many lies built around it), there is no doubt that it is a fascinating document — and one that cannot easily be neglected, since its words rule our lives. Whether we like it or not, the Bible is the moral dialectic upon which our culture was founded and bred — and is regulated.

One of the curiosities of fundamentalist creeds — those that purport to read the Bible literally or, at the least, directly — is that their ministers work less often from the Bible than from their own versions of the "truth."

The ever-angry Kenneth Copeland, for example, hawks an "amplified Bible," whose title alone serves notice that it is an embellishment — a fiction.

But then again, the Bible itself is fiction — at least in part. Even if we hold to its truth — the truth of its words, the truth of its God — we must consider its writers, who, after all, were only human. Whether inspired by grace or special wisdom, they saw the world

through their own eyes and used their own words to put "truth" to the page — just as, centuries later, translators would use their own words (many of them inaccurate) to convey the message to new readers. More important, the Bible uses fiction; and that, you see, is the rub.

My real problem with the fundamentalists — the supposed Biblical literalists — is that Jesus Christ, the hero of the very book in which they find their literal "truths," speaks in parables. He tells stories. He knew the power of fiction, and used fiction to instruct and elevate those who would listen to Him. And the very act of storytelling by the man whom many believe was God incarnate is rather convincing proof that the God of the Bible indeed works in mysterious ways: that He will, when appropriate, offer stories rather than literal truth to explain the human condition — thus, perhaps, a creation story to explain evolution and its responsibilities.

The ministers have hijacked the Bible, and the time is long overdue for the people to take it back. Clive Barker is doing just that.

His first books were titled in blood, and he was knighted "the future of horror," but Clive Barker was not typecast so easily. After *The Damnation Game* (1985), an accomplished first novel that was unmistak-

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ably the stuff of horror, Barker surprised and confounded many readers by penning a series of books that broke ranks with expectation and genre.

In *Weaveworld* (1986), he gave notice that horror fiction was merely the beachhead in his British invasion of the realm of the *fantastique*. By the time of his monumental *Imajica* (1991), reviewers and copy writers were scrambling for a new label — “dark fantasy” was a favorite — but by then, Clive Barker was a genre unto himself.

Barker’s new novel, *Everville* (HarperCollins hc, 697 pp., \$25.00; HarperPrism pb.), is the second book of a trilogy-in-progress known as *THE ART*. Although their literary antecedents include Eddison’s Zimiamvian novels and Tolkien’s *LORD OF THE RINGS*, the books of *THE ART* are written without the affectations of latter day faerie. This is decidedly contemporary fiction that speaks in every critical passage to reality.

The opening novel of *THE ART* was *The Great and Secret Show* (1989), a hallucinatory battle royale between men and demigods centered on the discovery of an unChristian cross and an evolutionary drug known as the Nuncio. Set firmly in, and then subverting, the *Salem’s Lot* template of eighties horror fiction — the small town isolated and besieged by evil — *The Great and Secret Show* eschewed the generic ploy of a monster-threatened reality and proposed instead an interpenetration of realities, a setting in which characters might dream with their eyes open. Barker cleverly poised one dream of America — the false dream of Hollywood, played out on ever-flickering screens — against the true dream of self-knowledge, the hope for an existence that transcended flesh.

In *Everville*, Barker deconstructs another American dream — the dream of the West, of pioneers and *lebensraum*. (It is no small irony that Hollywood, at the westward limit of the continent, should become the dream machine of America, the means by which we have sought to conquer the remainder of the globe.) His story does not pick up on the trail of *The Great and Secret Show*, but nearly 150 years before the events of that novel, on the Oregon Trail.

The time is October 1848; the place is Wyoming. A lost and ragged band of pioneers, many of them immigrants, shrugs through a violent snowstorm, the final test of an ill-fated trek that left Independence, Missouri, in search of a promised land but found only spiritual reckoning and death.

One child has survived: Maeve O’Connell, a sickly twelve-year-old whose daft father dares to dream of the glorious, shining city that he will build when their travails are complete — a paradise on the far side of the Rocky Mountains called Everville.

At Independence, Maeve’s father had met Owen Buddenbaum, a prissy student of the occult who seeks the parallel reality known as the Metacosm — the home of the eternal dream-sea, Quiddity, which is

visited but three times by humans: at birth, at death and upon consummating true love.

Buddenbaum’s name — Thomas Mann’s Buddenbrook by way of L. Frank Baum — evokes his transplanted European sensibilities, the decadence and old money of *The Damnation Game*, and a hint of the diabolical. But the stakes of his game are beyond damnation; he plays for redemption and that secret wisdom known as The Art.

Buddenbaum gives Maeve’s father a strange cross — twin to the medallion of *The Great of Secret Show* — to be buried at the crossroads of Everville, and tells him: “*Dreams are doorways. . . . If we but have the courage to step over the threshold.*”

Fast forward to the Twentieth Century and the Oregon town founded by the handful of surviving pioneers. Everville has become, with enough time and revisionist history, as American as apple pie and assassination. It is a setting that, like Palomo Grove of *The Great and Secret Show*, seems consciously Kinglike: a small town in bucolic retreat, laced with petty intrigue — unsolved crimes, infidelity, oldtime religion. This Norman Rockwell façade is peopled by those who came after the settlers, the builders of suburbs and founders of committees: “men and women who had lost all sense of the tender, terrible holiness of things.” The town’s secrets are locked securely inside the walls of the Everville Historical Society, which prefers the official history: “It was highly selective of course, but then were so many history lessons. There was no place in this celebration of the Evervillian spirit for the darker side; for images of destitution, or suicide, or worse. No room, either, for any individual who didn’t fit the official version of how things had come to be.”

There is no mention of Maeve O’Connell, her father or the true genesis of Everville in this hallowed fabrication. Maeve fulfilled her father’s dream, and Buddenbaum’s desire, by burying the cross and then singlehandedly creating the town of Everville through feminine wile. She built a whorehouse at the crossroads, filled it with beautiful women, and men — and, in time, the town — followed. But then, for the usual reasons — “too much righteousness and too little passion” — the whorehouse was burned. Maeve was exiled; later, she and her family were hanged, and the ashes of deception were spread.

Each year, Everville celebrates its fable with a festival; but this year, time folds backward and, as truths both physical and spiritual are revealed, a different kind of celebration occurs. What Buddenbaum set in motion those many years ago — a dance of being and becoming — reaches its grand (and occasionally gory) finale.

The dance card features a pair of starcrossed lovers: Phoebe Cobb, an overweight doctor’s receptionist, and a black painter, Joe Flicker. Phoebe’s marriage, and her life, have reached a dead-end. The faces of terminal patients look back at her as if from a mirror:

There was always such emptiness towards the end; such bitter looks on their faces, as though they'd been cheated of something and they couldn't quite figure out what. Even the church-goers, the ones she'd see in front of the tree in the square at Christmas singing hallelujahs, had that look. God wanted them in his bosom, but they didn't want to go; not until they'd made sense of things here.

But suppose there was no sense to be made? That was what she had come to believe more and more: that things happened, and there was no real reason why. You weren't being tested, you weren't being rewarded, you were just *being*. And so was everybody and everything else, including tumors and bad hearts: all just *being*.

She'd found the simplicity of this strangely comforting, and she'd made her own little religion of it.

Then Joe Flicker enters her life, offering, as his last name suggests, a flicker of love and hope — the dream of an existence beyond that of simply being. When Phoebe's brutal, vindictive husband interrupts their lovemaking, Phoebe fights back and then accidentally causes his death. Joe, a wounded fugitive, ventures up the mountain overlooking Everville and finds a crack in the world, escaping into the fabled Metacosm, where he explores the wonders of Quiddity. He eats of the dream-sea's fishes, drinks of its water, and finally sets sail on a harrowing voyage with a peculiar Noah and a crew of zombie slaves. His fear brings revelation:

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It was a long time since he'd begun a sentence with *Our Father*, but the words came back readily enough, and their familiarity was comforting. Perhaps, he thought, there was even a remote chance that the words were being heard. That notion — which would have seemed naive the day before — did not seem so idiotic now. He'd crossed a threshold into another state of being; a state that was just like another room in a house the size of the cosmos: literally a step away. If there was one such door to be entered, why not many? And why should one not be a door that led into Heaven?

All his adult life, he'd asked why. Why God? Why meaning? Why love? Now he realized his error. The question was not *why*, it was *why not*?

*Why not?* The question resounds throughout *Everville*. Metaphysical issues have always haunted Clive Barker's fiction, but in *Imajica* (1991) and now *Everville* he confronts them with a courage unprecedented in post-Vietnam horror and fantasy. This is the stuff of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams — though by no means as orthodox, and exercised without the polemics of William Peter Blatty or Russell Kirk. It is the fruition of Barker's longtime enthusiasm for William Blake: a visionary, illuminated fiction for the Millennium.

*Why not?* Joe Flicker's perilous voyage is paralleled in the night journeys of the novel's other lead characters, but its imagery is the most explicit. He sails



Thoreau's "private sea" — "the Atlantic and the Pacific of one's being alone" — without knowing, but in time learning, that its waters are public, the realm of humanity's relentless wishing, hoping, dreaming.

The unlikely — and unwilling — heroine of the epic is Tesla Bombeck, the failed screenwriter of *The Great and Secret Show* who, touched by the Nuncio, rose like any good messiah from the dead but who does not know, or care, why. Her allies are Nathan Grillo, the putative lead of *The Great and Secret Show*, who now slumps, withered and dying, before a computer database devoted to the weird; and demon-haunted New York private eye Harry D'Amour.

Tesla is cynical, hardbitten and tenacious — a pistolpacking skeptic with a taste for lost causes. The personality of Raul, the ape evolved to a man through the workings of the Nuncio, still lives inside her, wondering: "Would it be so bad . . . To have a messiah . . ." "You know," Tesla says. "I have a very good soul in my head. . . . The pity of it is, it isn't mine." She refuses to believe in saviors or love or hope or inevitability, and resolutely denies the power that has found her. Her definition of life? "One big fucking joke." Over the past five years she has traveled by motorcycle across the mainland states, finding nothing but a bitter truth: "All I know is, you're alone in the end. Always." Now the onetime screenwriter finds herself with nothing but beginnings — "always setting off on an unknown highway or opening a conversation with a stranger — and never getting to the second act. If the painful farce of her life to date was going to have any resolution, then she was going to have to move the story on."

Nathan Grillo has encamped in Omaha, the Crossroads of America, to become a clearinghouse for information about the events in Palomo Grove and, soon enough, baffling events of all kinds — "putting the pieces together, one by one, until he had the whole story." Like Tesla, he searches for connections, explanations, somewhere in the chaotic rumourmill of modern America. His ever-expanding database, an electronic bulletin board called the Reef, fills a network of computers.

Faced with nationwide sightings of martyred John Wesley Fletcher — a nascent Elvis or Bigfoot — Grillo muses: "I used to think it mattered whether or not things were real. I'm not so sure anymore. . . . Maybe the messiahs we *imagine* are more important than the real thing." In his forty-third year, he has succumbed to multiple sclerosis: "a mystery as profound as anything in the Reef, and a good deal more palpable." Death is coming for him, and soon.

Harry D'Amour, a cameo player in *The Great and Secret Show*, moves to center stage in *Everville*. (He also features in the Barker short stories "The Last Illusion" and "Lost Souls," and the forthcoming motion picture *Lord of Illusions*.) As always, the Devil is on D'Amour's mind. The devout detective is Barker's Jacob, wrestling not with flesh and blood, but with

spiritual wickedness in high places — demons, within and without. "The demons find you, because you need them," a psychic tells D'Amour. "You need them for the world to make sense to you."

Through D'Amour, Barker dispenses with the essential argument of Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971): that the existence of demons confirms the existence of angels — that, if there is a Devil, there must be a God: "It's one of those useless subjects." But D'Amour embraces Blatty's view of the singleminded purpose of spiritual evil: his demons, like those that torment Father Damien Karras, are relentlessly excremental "because that's what they want the world to be: Shit." They would make us despair of our humanity, of the possibility that the human condition is joyful — and possibly divine. Sadly, no one is willing to listen to such thoughts — just as many are unwilling to listen to the likes of Clive Barker:

At the beginning of his career — when his investigations as a private detective had first led him into the company of the inhuman — he had entertained the delusion that he might with time help turn the tide against these forces by alerting the populace to their presence. He soon learned his error. People didn't want to know. They had drawn the parameters of belief so as to exclude such horrors, and would not, could not, tolerate or comprehend anybody who sought to move the fences.

Death, demons, dismay: Barker's haunted investigators move through a world of sorrows — not the cotton candy realm of generic horror fiction, where order can and will be restored, but the shrouded uncertainty that we know as life. We should know by now that answers to the real questions are never easy, but we choose too often to embrace the bright light of escape — sunshine and television and the fiction of happy endings. As a mysterious wise man (who looks suspiciously like Jesus) tells Tesla: "You wanted connections, and they're there to be found. But you have to look in the terrible places, Tesla. The places where death comes to take love away, where we lose each other and lose ourselves; that's where the connections begin. It takes a brave soul to look there and not despair."

As Tesla, Grillo, and D'Amour search out those terrible places, Phoebe Cobb pursues her lost love, Joe Flicker, through the phantasmagoria of the Metacosm, experiencing its wild wonders: the ceaseless gaze of the golden-eyed fish known as the Zehrapushu; a man of dust and rock called King Texas; the miraculous b'Kether Sabbat, an inverted, populated pyramid that would dwarf Manhattan; and the curious city of Liverpool, constructed by the dreaming of an ancient crone named Maeve O'Connell. For Maeve, the eternal orphan and outcast, lives on; and inevitably, she must return to Everville — for something is summoning her home.

The end times are approaching. "The fact was,

something would happen. If not tonight, tomorrow night. If not tomorrow night, the night after. The world was losing its wits."

There is danger at large, and it is not mere demons: "Demons were simple. They believed in prayer and the potency of holy water. Thus they fled from both. But men — what did men believe?" Like Phoebe before she found love, most men believe only in being — a polite way of saying that they believe only in self, and thus, in time, in nothing. And to believe in nothing is to give that most horrible of things — nothing — life.

From beyond Quiddity comes the living nothing called the Iad Uroboros — a tsunami of fleas and mountains, mountains and fleas — "Not it. Them. It's a nation. A people. Not remotely like us, but a people nevertheless, who've always harbored a hunger to be in your world." When Flicker asks why, the reply is simple: "Does appetite need reasons?"

The Iad swarms over the Metacosm and into our world, undoing everything in its path. For D'Amour, the Iad and the Anti-Christ are the same thing: "It's all the Devil by another name." But the Iad defies such simplistic notions as good and evil. Perhaps we dreamed it into being, perhaps it is the darkness in the collective soul of our species: "Uroboros, the self-devouring serpent, encircling the earth while it ate its own tail. An image of power as a self-sufficient engine: implacable, incomprehensible, inviolate." The Iad is the ultimate cancer, the AIDS of the human spirit: "What she saw put her in mind of a disease — a terrible, implacable, devouring disease. It had no face. It had no malice. It had no guilt. Perhaps it didn't even have a mind. It came because it could; because nothing stopped it."

While a traditional horror or fantasy novel would concern itself with the answer to this juggernaut — how it might be stopped, put back in the box — Everville is concerned with a much greater, more vital mystery: The mystery of life in its shadow.

The annual festival begins with a pageant, telling the story — that shameless fable — of the founding of Everville. It ends in chaos — but a gloriously inventive, life-affirming chaos — as countless other stories, the secret histories and the secret fantasies, are told. Buddenbaum's patient puppetry has engineered a gateway to The Art. The long-buried medallion shining bright at the crossroads has accrued the power to change the world; but The Art is not his to possess. It is Tesla who falls into its everlasting embrace and who, at the moment of death, sees the simple truth, buried for so long in our consciousness:

And there it was, shining in the dirt: the cross of crosses, the sign of signs. In the long, slow moments of her dying fall, she remembered with a kind of yearning how she'd solved the puzzles of that cross; seen the



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four journeys that were etched upon it. One to the dream world, one to the real; one to the bestial, one to the divine. And there at the heart of these journeys — where they crossed, where they divided, where they finished and began — the human mystery. It was not about flesh, that mystery: It was not about hanging broken from a cross or the triumph of the spirit over suffering. It was about the living dream of mind, that made body and spirit and all they took joy in.

Buddenbaum's invocation: "*Dreams are doorways. . . . If we but have the courage to step over the threshold,*" proved true. "Maybe the door's supposed to be open," D'Amour is told. "Maybe we have to start looking at what's in our dreams, only with our eyes open."

Dreams are the signs that the promise of The Art — the promise of that higher being, or higher state of being — was not a hollow promise; that the human mind could know the past, present, and future as one eternal moment.

"Every art but one was a game of delusions." That art — The Art — is the living dream of mind: the imagination, always creating, showing, telling. For there is indeed one True Religion: "It's the stories that matter, however they're told. . . . And every life, how-

ever short, however meaningless it seems, is a leaf . . . on the story tree."

*Everville* is a celebration of story — and of life in the constant shadow of death (and the darker shadow beyond). It speaks to the only kind of fantasy that matters: the fantasies of reality, the stories whose telling informs and uplifts the human condition.

It is also a book of beginnings, from a writer who, like his own Tesla Bombeck, is a connoisseur of stories and journeys, always beginning and rarely ending. (Tesla's need to "move the story on" is wryly self-conscious.) While *The Great and Secret Show* walked paths familiar to readers of horror and fantasy, *Everville* wanders deeper into the dark forest. It may be read on its own, though clearly the books are best read in sequence.

Working with unbridled enthusiasm and ambition, Barker has created a unique middle book that is much more than a bridge to some grand finale, spinning out new, and sometimes supervening, stories while embellishing not so much the action but the ideas of the first book. The narrative veers, circles, collapses, moving forward less through plot than the insistence of its imagery.

The casual reader may find the sheer profusion of characters, plots and images overwhelming — or hypnotic, as Barker's psychotropic prose engages and eludes, focuses and blurs, offers illusions and delusions, truths and lies. With its epic sprawl and constant spiraling, *Everville* is not for the lazy, but it is profoundly rewarding — and, in its closing pages, deeply moving.

#### BRIEFLY NOTED

***The Informers*** by Bret Easton Ellis (Knopf, 226 pp., \$22.00).

The master of the mock savage follows his controversial *American Psycho* with a deceptively powerful — and horrific — excursion into the Los Angeles of the eighties. This "novel" — actually a series of disjointed story/chapters that progress with the nightmarish insistence of J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibi-*

*bition* (1969) — evolves (a bit too slowly) from shallow sociodrama into a disturbing glimpse into the darkness that hides in bright sunshine.

***Red London*** by Stewart Home (AK Press, 158 pp., £5.95, \$12.95); ***No Pity*** by Stewart Home (AK Press, 143 pp., £5.95, \$12.95).

Stewart Home is the kind of writer whose fiction invariably is labelled "cult," if not "trash" — in part because most reviewers lack the interest or courage to accept that this kind of writing exists, and in part because it is impossible to imagine these words being read by a mass audience. Home tosses off effusively anarchic stories that crawl out of a splatter/sperm/shit-soaked squalor into bright moments of genuine wit. At his best, he reads like a pulp fiction version of Dennis Cooper, mingling violence with rampant (and, for the most part, homoerotic) sexuality — all told with the mantralike obsessiveness of pornography ("liquid genetics" and "rim of dark pleasures" being two of Home's favored phrases). *Red London*, a novel of skinhead sadism, is the better of the two books; *No Pity*, which collects stories written from 1986 to 1993, includes both outright embarrassments and strident successes.

***American Tabloid*** by James Ellroy (Knopf, 576 pp., \$25.00).

Ellroy's take on the macho hijinks preceding the assassination of John F. Kennedy re-enacts some seedy moments of the late fifties/early sixties Americana through the eyes of three law-enforcement lowlifes.

Although exceptional at times — particularly in its damn-the-torpedoes action sequences — *American Tabloid* is overdone and overlong. Like most Kennedy conspiracy whodunits (whether published as fiction or "fact"), the novel requires a suspension of disbelief that is not justified by the facts, and a conviction that the Kennedy brothers were naive and incapable men. Camelot was a myth, but in hammering this truth home, *American Tabloid* loses its own sense of reality. An entertaining but ultimately disappointing novel from a great writer. Ω



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# THE WEREWOLF

by Tanith Lee

illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

The house overhung a corner of the heath, where the columns of the trees climbed up into the lanes and streets above. The building was like an outpost, for no other houses were on the road for half a mile, and the streetlights were few. An occasional car passed by on its speeding way to somewhere else. The house was sometimes noted, for it was Gothic in design and had a high tower, turrets, and tall windows fruited with coloured glass. No one approached, and certainly no one was near enough, on nights of the full moon, to catch the screams within the house of the werewolf, as he was translated into his bestial shape.

It was a hot summer, and at night a low mist lay along the earth. The tree tops were clear, and high above the house stood the smudged white plume of the moon. About eleven, something dark might be seen slinking grotesquely down the outer stairway of the house, between the shrubs.

This was the manner in which the werewolf descended to the heath. The heath was his hunting ground. But not always did he locate prey there, and then not always human — the kind for which he lusted. It was the moonlight night between the trees which drew him primarily, perhaps more than the severe hunger for blood. In the form of such a thing as he became, he could not stay inside the walls of a house, even the Gothic house on the slope.

The heath by night was like a frame of the past. The werewolf's beast eyes did not see the litter of chocolate wrappers, cans, cigarettes and condoms. The beast existed in a world of primal timelessness. The beast did not think, or have a need to.

Now and then, the remains of the werewolf's feasts had been uncovered, and had given rise to an on-going legend of unsolved murder cases, loosely known by the title of *The Heath Hacker*.

Though unnatural they were not rated as *supernatural*, and though once or twice over the years police had called at the isolated house, its occupant had never been under suspicion.

He was a small, mild, fussy man of late middle age, the antithesis of anything dramatic, and obviously without the physical strength the murders had required.

Generally bodies were not found, the very little that had been left of them trampled or buried in leaf mould, under boulders, or rolled into deep bushes. Dogs too were inclined to avoid these kills. They ran to their owners with their tails down and their eyes full of green horror.

The dogs knew what the travellers and the questing police did not.

"There is a werewolf on the heath," said Constant to Vivienne.

"What rubbish," said Vivienne, a slender white girl of twenty with maroon hair. And, after a pause, "Why do you say such things?"

"Because of the bones. Look," and bending gracefully he picked up a long stick of creamy grey. "A tibia. And over there another. The third evidence I've seen this afternoon."

"Even if it is a bone," said Vivienne, swinging her heavy rufous hair, "it's animal. Picked clean. A fox, maybe."

"Not of a fox or by a fox. I've noticed, none of these bones, therefore none of the carcasses, were dragged into a lair. Normally you'd expect animals to polish off the left-overs whoever caused them, but these they've left strictly alone."

"Terrified by the taint of wolf."

"Not wolf. Werewolf. You mustn't confuse the two."

"But I thought," said Vivienne, "that a werewolf was someone who turned into a wolf."

"In a way," said Constant, elusively. He infuriated her subtly, which was the other reason, aside from his handsome foreignness, which attracted Vivienne to him.

"Well," she said, "we're quite safe by daylight, aren't we? It's only at night that werewolves walk, or stalk, or whatever they do."

"The three nights of the full moon. The full moon affects all of us to some extent. It moves the tides of the sea, and the tides of the water which makes up so much of the human composition. How could we not be affected? But to a werewolf the tidal urge draws up its inner nature."

They crossed one of the many tracks of the woodland, and came out in a great meadow lit by flowers and sun.

"What a lovely summer," said Vivienne. "And no people."

"This is the advantage of a week day," said Constant. "At night, of course, people do come here."

"For illicit sex," said Vivienne, primly, having made love with Constant not two hours before.

"And other darker things," said Constant, looking about.

"Murder and evil," said Vivienne.

"You're right," said Constant, "to separate the two concepts. Evil is by itself."

"And the werewolf hunts here," said Vivienne, "over the moonlit grass, chasing the sly rapists and skulking muggers."

"Of course."

"You really believe what you say," accused Vivienne.

They left the meadow and were under the trees again. "This is a fearful place," said Constant, "a sink of ancient crimes. You can only see the yellow flowers and hear the birds singing. At night everything is black and white. The birds hide, the flowers close fast."

"And the werewolf bounds between the trees."

Constant stopped.

Vivienne stopped also and turned to see.

Above the wood the ground ran upwards.

"That's the way on to South Heath Road."

"That house," said Constant.

"Oh that — it's marvellous, isn't it," said Vivienne. "You can see it further up on the heath too, by Walworth Lane. But here's best. I used to come and draw it years ago."

"You were most unwise," said Constant.

"Nonsense," said Vivienne, "there were six or seven of us used to come here in a group. Once we saw the funny man who lived there. He came out and sort of hippity-hopped down that stair to put something out over the garden wall."

"I hope you didn't go to see what it was."

"Joanie did. It was a great mound of awful old curtains. There was a place where things were burnt. He was obviously going to burn them sometime."

"And this man with the curtains," said Constant, "what was he like?"

"About five feet five, slim in a plump, weak sort of way, with a round pudding of a face. He had thin hair and baggy trousers and a cardigan, and he wore slippers."

"What a good memory you have," said Constant slowly.

"I wonder if he still lives there?" pondered Vivienne. "I should think so."

They were walking up through the wood towards the house. Its wall and flight of steps hung over them through the poles of the trees and the garlands of thick green leaves.

"There's the burning place," said Vivienne. "And look, something's smouldering there now. Naughty, in this heat."

"He would find fire attractive," said Constant, "in his human form. Things that sparkle. Fire, water, jewels."

"Oh yes?"

"One of the oldest ways to hypnotise his kind," said Constant, "a diamond in a bowl of water. Or a ruby under a candle. In the human form only. Once transmogrified, nothing can reach him. He is all beast."

"You think the funny pudding man in slippers is your werewolf?"

"Look at the house," said Constant. "The coloured bright windows, the dark tower."

"Isn't it just too apt?"

"Your reasoning is overly sophisticated," said Constant. "You're dealing here with something very simple, and utterly terrible."

"Brr," said Vivienne. "Can we come back at full moon and see?"

"Tonight is full moon."

"Is it? Well, then. We can lie in wait. Catch him out."

"You don't understand, Vivienne. It's he who would catch you. He would tear you in pieces and devour you."

"Nasty. Then I'd need a silver bullet."

"A silver bullet isn't necessary. Is useless."

"Now you should know," said Vivienne, "you can't kill a werewolf without one."

"It's just a misunderstanding," said Constant.

"Usually such executions were carried out by villages in remote places where ammunition was scarce or obsolete. The bullet was made from some holy object melted down, a cross from the church, say, or the replica of a saint. It's the faith of the hunter which assures the shot. Otherwise a werewolf is impossible to kill."

"You mean you must have faith in God."

"Yee, I mean exactly that. Faith in something other than the power of evil."

"I wouldn't be any good then," Vivienne said seriously, after a silence.

"I know. You're too young, Vivienne, and your culture is too young."

"Oh really? Well you're no better."

"My country to yours," he said, "is an old bowed man. And I'm far older, Vivienne, although not in years."

"Then you can kill the werewolf?" she asked, mockingly, as they stood among the trees below the Gothic house, and the birds sang in the sunlight.

"I believe in God," said Constant. "Perhaps I could kill the werewolf. But who said I was going to try?"

By the late afternoon a golden glow filled the heath, and the dark amber of the shadows lay thickly twisted on the ground between the trees. The things of the day fed and played and darted in the last spaces of sunlight. Everything busied itself, for now time was running out.

The westering sun worked tricks too with the windows of the house, finding in them long daggers of rose red and Egyptian green.

The door was of oak, with a black iron knocker of an imp's head. Constant, standing alone in the porch, considered the knocker, and then used it decisively.

There was an extended interval between the knock and any sound inside the house, but Constant did not knock again. He knew the house's inhabitant was obedient and law-abiding, and would come to answer the summons. Presently there was a faint shuffling from beyond the door. It opened.

"Good afternoon," said Constant.



"Yes?" asked the inhabitant of the house. He was the height Vivienne had described and had to look up half a foot into Constant's face. Though slim, his body was composed of curves, and a little round tummy pushed at his poplin shirt and fawn trousers. His head was also round, and in the round countenance two fish-pale eyes gazed, not unfriendly, into Constant's own. It was a mild creature, shy but trusting. "How can I help you?"

"It was your wonderful house," said Constant.

"My house."

"I was wondering if you would object if I took some photographs? Only for my own personal record. I am intrigued by architecture."

Constant put out his left hand and readjusted the camera case he was holding. Something glittered. The man's eyes shifted and came to rest there. As Constant put down his hand again, the man's eyes followed it avidly.

"No, no objection, of course. Please feel free."

Constant thanked the obliging householder, who stood and watched him as he went back down the steps, and retreated a little way along the slope. Here he removed from the camera case an impressive looking Nikon, set it up on a monopod, and began apparently to frame a shot.

After Constant had taken two or three photographs of the facade of the house, the man went back inside. Maybe he would watch from windows, between the screens of coloured glass.

Constant went about the building slowly, sometimes ascending the slope, now and then kneeling in the grass.

On the smallest finger of his left hand the diamond flashed in his father's ring, a piece of jewelry which Constant did not normally wear.

After perhaps fifteen minutes, the front door of the house reopened. The man came out and stood watching Constant take a long angled shot of the tower.

"Have you finished? I didn't want to disturb you. I wondered if you'd care for a cup of tea."

English tea, probably from tea-bags, and with milk, had never appealed to Constant, but now he nodded enthusiastically. He returned to the house, having closed up the camera in its case and telescoped the monopod.

"That's very kind of you."

"I thought you might like to see something of the inside as well."

"I would," Constant said.

From a black and white checkerboard floor a stair curved up, a carved indulgence, and highly polished — someone must come in, presumably in the mornings or early afternoons, leaving, in winter, long before it got dark. Above the stair a huge window of crimson lilies and Nile water showered the hall, and their skins, with tinted lights like some beautiful disease.

His host led Constant into a drawing-room. There were two more windows, each with an ornate fe-

male figure, perhaps Muses, for they were classically adorned, and with Burne-Jones hair, rather like Vivienne's in colour. Otherwise the room was stuffed full of elderly furniture, bulging couches and chairs and a plethora of small tables. The ceiling was a carousel of plaster shapes, fruits and vines, echoed in a gilt mirror above the fireplace. Despite the attentions of the help, there was an aura of dust, weightless as the deepening sunlight.

They sat down, and the man poured out the tea in a careful, feminine way. Constant took his without milk, and was pleased to note the werewolf had used leaves.

"I hope you got the pictures you wanted."

"I hope so too; the light's a little undependable at this time."

"Yes, the evening draws on. I like this hour of day. I find it restful." Constant smiled politely and raised his cup. "Forgive my saying so, but I'm quite fascinated by your ring."

"A family heirloom," said Constant, "it belonged to my father. Would you like to see it more closely?" He slipped off the ring and handed it to the little man in the poplin shirt. Who grasped it, *absorbed* it, and taking it over to the light, *played* with it, turning it this way and that, over and over, to make it glitter.

Constant surreptitiously timed him. It was a full six minutes before the werewolf turned and said, regretfully, "An excellent stone. I confess I'm drawn to such things — as you are to houses. I have a small collection, some rubies, a diamond."

Constant retrieved the ring from reluctant fingers, and got up. "Thank you for the tea."

"But stay a little longer," said the werewolf, looking at him with luminous lonely eyes. "I can show you over the house."

"That's remarkably kind of you, but unfortunately I have to be in Walworth by seven."

"Meeting a young lady perhaps," said the werewolf, playfully.

"No, actually. Then again I sometimes walk the heath at dusk, the quietest time, I find. Perhaps I could call on you again."

The eyes of the werewolf gave off a peculiar stony flash. Had no one ever noticed this before, police questioning after murders, shopkeepers, the weekly help? It was the beast part of the subconscious brain incoherently communicating. For there were nights like tonight when the full moon rose at dusk. Perhaps it would be possible to add this diamond to the collection? Off what bitten and ravaged fingers, ears and throats had the other trophies come?

"Of course, feel free to knock. I may not answer unless I can be sure it's you. I'm sensibly rather nervous of callers after dark."

He took Constant back across the checkered floor where the colours of the window had deepened to blood and chartreuse.

They parted at the door with expressions of mutual friendliness, having not exchanged their names.

Outside on the mellow heath, Constant studied his watch. Two hours before dark.

The light perished in stages. Birds quartered the sky, sank and vanished into the high coronas of the trees. A deaf rustling in the undergrowth signalled the passing of other daylight entities to their holes and burrows. A few people came walking along Walworth Lane, heading out of the woodland towards the traffic lights and busy high street of Walworth one mile off along the road.

Constant sat on a fallen tree beside the Lane. Behind him, still partly concealed in hushes, was his motorbike. As the flame began to leave the sky, he drew the bike out and walked it up the steep incline. He stood among the tree trunks, looking down across the umbra of the heath.

To the naked eye, the towered house a quarter of a mile away was quite visible, small and perfect as a model above the trees. It stood in a bowl of gold, the last traces of the sunset. A pale ghost, caught on the rim of the light, the moon had already risen.

The heat of the sky went to ashes.

Constant set the camera on the monopod, and attached the powerful zoom lens. He set his sights for the outer stairway of the house.

The image leapt towards him. He could see the brickwork on the wall, flower heads on the shrubs. As the afterglow faded the sullen marble stare of the moon took over; a cold blind eye.

He saw now in black and white.

Constant waited.

After ten minutes something dark appeared on the stairway. It might have been anything, perhaps a large dog let out. It passed between the shrubs, and paused, and the moon came over the house, so everything was lit up in a cool white searchlight. The thing on the stairway raised its head. Constant saw it through the lens.

It was black like a ball of shadow. The skull was a little too large for the body so that in form it was like a boar, heavy-headed, powerful in the shoulder. The black head was something like a wolf's, with a great ruff of black hair. The mouth came open and all the teeth appeared in the muzzle, not the teeth of a wolf but each pointed, the canines enormous, and between them the movement of a thick black tongue.

Constant touched the button of the camera, and the head swung. Across a quarter mile of dusk and sudden silence, the eyes of the thing on the stair met Constant's eye within the lens. The eyes were red even in moonlight, with a sheen like oil. They held a thousand years of awareness but not a single thought. They were not the eyes of a wolf, but of some creature older and unremittingly terrible, inimical to yet entirely belonging with man. The eyes of a monster not a beast.

Constant depressed the button of the camera.

The tiny click echoed sheer and sharp across the sloping valley. It was the only sound.

by Tanith Lee

The werewolf heard.

Its muzzle wrinkled and its soulless eyes became two pits of blood. Constant heaved the camera free and thrust it and the lens into their case, folded up the monopod, and slung them on the bike.

Mounting the bike, he gunned the engine into life.

In his vision was the image of the werewolf pouring suddenly over down the stair like a bolt of black liquid.

The motorhike cannoned into motion. It swerved down the hill between the trees and skated out on to the road. Bearing left, it burst forward and the pillars of the trees became a blur. Ground erupted beneath the wheels and was gone.

The hike could outrace death. As he rode between the shadows, Constant murmured a few words of thanks, in Latin.

He was almost off the Lane when he made out the two figures walking towards him along the edge of the road.

Constant jammed the hike to a standstill.

He waved at them, the two young men in denims and Tshirts, walking hand in hand until they saw him coming, not pleased to encounter him.

"Don't go on to the heath."

"What's he say?" one of them asked the other.

"A member of the moral majority," said this other, and grinned.

"There is a wild animal loose," said Constant, "there is danger."

"He's nuts," said the first boy.

"Piss off," said the second boy to Constant.

They shrugged him away and strolled on along the Lane, the black shade of the trees coming down to smother them. The low mist was forming in veils.

Constant shouted after them once. It was useless. What could he tell them they would believe? They would have to take their chances along with the other creatures of the night. Perhaps something might distract the werewolf, it might take a different path. It could not have seen the camera, though it had looked straight at it, and the sound of the button might have been anything. To the thing it was, a camera anyway was senseless.

Constant raced the motorbike on and came to the lights, the intersection, the brink of the high street, its shops, and cars in flight. Only there, hesitating a moment, did he seem to hear a distant noise, far back among the trees. It might have been a squeal of hrakes, the call of a night bird, or a human cry, stripped of all meaning but fear.

"What have you been doing all afternoon?" asked Vivienne.

"Developing some film."

"Let me see."

"No, there's nothing that would interest you," said Constant.

"You've been back to that house," said Vivienne, shaking her sea green beads. "What did you find?"

"Which house?" said Constant.

"Did you know, there's been another murder on the heath. Not The Hacker. Did you read about it?"

"I never read newspapers," said Constant.

"It was very gory," said Vivienne. "But a jealous lover, they think. The man was gay. Torn in pieces."

"Just one," said Constant.

The other must have run, perhaps been felled in another place, more thoroughly devoured, or hidden.

"The heath is horrible," said Vivienne petulantly.

"I would advise you then to avoid it," said Constant. "For now."

The black iron imp knocked against the oak door with especial force, and birds in the neighbouring trees took fright.

Constant attended on the knock as he had done before. And after some while, as before, the door was dutifully opened.

Late afternoon light fell slanting on the curves of the gentle face, the innocent belly. This time the shirt was of grey rayon.

"Good afternoon," said Constant. "Do you remember? I took some photographs of your house and you were kind enough to give me tea."

"Ah, yes," the man said. "I do indeed remember."

"I thought," said Constant, "you might care to see the pictures." With his diamonded left hand he tapped a folder.

"Oh yes, oh yes indeed."

The door was opened wide, and Constant admitted.

Familiar, rose and green fell from the window. In the drawing-room the two Muses were at their stations. A faint cobweb floated high up in the plaster carousel of the ceiling. Peach-coloured, the light leaned on the mirror above the fireplace.

The sat down. One by one, Constant handed the householder his views of the house. Of the tall facade, the windows and the steps, the angled tower.

"These are really quite splendid," said the man, admiringly. "A true professional job. The hour is rather later today; can I offer you a sherry?"

Constant, who did not like sherry, professed pleasure.

The man brought two small glasses of gold and set them on the table where the pictures lay.

"There's one more I should like to show you," Constant said. "It was taken from across the heath, and the sun had gone down. Infra-red film. The quality is rather grainy, I'm afraid."

The little man took the photograph and stared at it. He stared a long time.

"But what is this?"

"A view of the outer stairway."

"Yes, I see — but —"

"You notice something on the steps," said Constant.

"Surely," said the werewolf, "only a strange shadow."

"Do shadows have eyes?"

The man laughed uneasily. He took a sip of his sherry. "What can it be, I wonder?"

"Perhaps you own a dog?" said Constant, helpfully.

The man blinked. "No. No dog. I've never been able to get on with animals."

"I wonder what it is, then," said Constant. "It looks like an animal, doesn't it?"

"Yes . . . very like one. How odd." The windows were clouding, the peach ray was gone from the mirror. "Possibly, some light . . ." The man went to a series of lamps and switched them on one by one. The room lit up and the windows turned blue. "Once the sun goes down," said the werewolf, "this house grows very dark."

"The moon was shining when I took the photograph," said Constant. "A full moon, very bright."

The werewolf lifted up the photograph a second time and peered at it shortsightedly. "Probably I should fetch my glasses. I can't make it out at all. What do you think it is?"

"Oh," said Constant, "I think it's a photograph of you."

"Of me?" The werewolf raised his head.

All at once there was a suggestion of heaviness to his skull and shoulders, something ape-like, and the eyes were flat and thoughtless, some instinct struggling to pierce to their surface. Failing.

"If I had come back last week," said Constant, "there would have been no doubt. But of course the nights of the full moon are over until next month, aren't they?"

"But this isn't human," said the man resentfully.

"Not human? Would you say it was a wolf?"

"Maybe," said the man, cautiously, almost bashfully.

"No, it isn't a wolf," said Constant. "That is a misnomer. The wolf is a clean animal whose eyes are like a man's. What eyes does this thing have? Like the Devil. Perhaps the superstitions of wolves, the lies, what men fear when they hear the cry of a wolf: That. But this is a beast from the swamp at the bottom of man's soul. A beast from the id. Solely man's. Completely *human*."

Constant got up and drew something else out of the folder. He unwrapped it quickly. It was a steak knife from Selfridges.

"No," said the man, moving backwards, judging his route, through long proximity, between the bulky furniture.

"There is another way, of course, to see the change," said Constant. He ran forward and stuck the knife into the werewolf's round belly, until only the handle protruded.

The werewolf gave a scream and fell on to the floor. His blood splashed round him. He tried to pull out the knife and did not have the strength.

Constant watched.

Outside was the shadow of a moonless dusk, but in the room the lamps fully illuminated the death-throes. Then they illuminated the long after-spasms as the

body altered, the clothes splitting and the skin heaving, the great muscles pumping up and the hair swarming out like a dark forest. Halfway through, the transmogrification ceased, unable to sustain itself without life. What was left on the carpet was a thing one third a man and two thirds some sort of beast, unlike anything yet reminiscent of a wolf. From the guts of this Constant plucked his knife, wrapped it,

and replaced it with the photographs in his folder. What the police would say when they were called by the help was a matter for conjecture.

Constant left the lights burning, and went out through the hall. The window cast on him a last meteor shower. The rest of the house hung dark and silent in a void. He closed the door with care, and walked away over the heath in the night. Ω

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# BAD WHEELS

by John Accursi

illustrated by George Barr

One minute till midnight.

The only sound in the garage was the low buzzing of a digital clock; the only light came from the glowing red 11:59 that shone on its display. A thin wire connected the alarm clock to a small dust-covered cassette player, and both of the devices sat on an ancient black paint-spotted sawhorse that had been moved to the center of the garage. Next to the car.

The temperature outside had climbed to a hundred and five degrees before night had mercifully fallen and pressed all that heat into the ground. Now a dry wind was pulling the warmth back up again, stirring it up and letting it just hover over the empty streets. The black-as-night 1955 Corvette sat in the sweltering darkness of the garage, shining and untouched by dust, though every bench, chair, and discarded tool in the garage was blanketed with it. When the time on the clock changed, the Corvette's black-tinted windshield reflected the digits as clearly and sharply as a mirror.

Midnight.

The instant the display showed 12:00 there was a high-pitched, strained whining from the old cassette deck as its dust-clogged motor slowly came to life. The message on the tape began to sputter through the player's single speaker.

*Aglon . . . Tetragram . . . Vaycheon . . . Stimulamathon . . . Erohahes . . . Retragsammathon . . . Clyoran . . . Icion . . .*

The wind outside began to blow dead leaves and bits of tree branches against the door of the garage. The heat grew worse. The garage door began to rock back and forth within its frame, as though something was trying to pry it open. The darkness in the garage seemed to constrict around the Corvette.

*Esition . . . Existien . . . Eryona . . . Onera . . .*

The Corvette began to shake. Its wheels squeaked faintly as they vibrated against the cement floor. The garage filled with an odor as though the very air were burning, and the layers of dust that covered everything suddenly turned to dark, thick ash.

† † †

*Erasyn . . . Moyn . . . Meffias . . . Soter . . . Sabaoth!*

The tape recorder clicked itself off just as an explosion of orange light flooded the garage, and there was a flicker of movement behind the Corvette's tinted windshield.

The demon's name was Adrammelech, and it had materialized in the driver's seat, with four spider-like arms already wrapped around the steering wheel. This time it had managed not to scorch the leather seat, and it was very pleased about that. It changed one of its arms into something nearly human in order to turn the key in the ignition.

Adrammelech looked over at the clock on the sawhorse and saw that it was not yet even a minute past midnight. The Corvette started as always on the first turn of the key, and the demon opened the garage door and backed the black machine out onto the empty street, pointing it toward the familiar glitter of the Los Angeles skyline, several miles away. The Corvette's gold-framed license plate read: DEMON 1.

The demon made 0 to 60 in just over three seconds.

The driver of the beige Volkswagen SuperBeetle glanced up into the rear-view mirror and saw the headlights wink on about a mile behind him. It had been ten minutes since the last car had passed him, and he had been enjoying having the dark swath of highway all to himself. The steady humming of the Beetle's engine and the sensation of the freeway rushing by underneath the car were almost hypnotically soothing. And now this bastard behind him with his brights on was going to ruin everything.

The driver slowed down to let the other car pass him more quickly, so that he'd have the road to himself again. As he decelerated, the headlights began to gain on him rapidly.

Too rapidly.

The headlights had been in the fast lane, to the left of the Beetle, but now they weaved into the number two lane, only a hundred yards away and still picking up speed.

"What the Hell?" the driver asked the rearview mirror. He swung the Beetle into the number three lane, hoping the driver of the other car would leave him alone and just pass him. Fifty yards behind him, the headlights swung into the lane with him. The glow of headlights in the rearview mirror was blinding.

The driver of the Beetle panicked and began to accelerate, but the headlights did not fall any farther behind. He became aware of the roar of the other car's motor as it barreled down on him.

When the black machine was five yards behind it the Beetle skidded onto the shoulder at seventy miles an hour. The car ran off the far side of the shoulder and onto rough dirt, just as the side of the highway gave way to an underpass for one of the surface streets. He lost control of the steering as one of the front wheels lurched over a large rock and the car tore through a chain-link fence. The Beetle left the road entirely and was in free fall for about thirty feet before its front end flattened against the ground in an explosion of tearing metal and shattering glass. Flames and smoke erupted out of the engine and gas tank in waves.

The demon laughed so uncontrollably that it turned into a glob of translucent jelly and had to ooze back up to the seat to see through the windshield. It accelerated to ninety miles an hour, still laughing horribly, and headed for the off ramp just over a mile ahead.

Adrammelech took the sharp turn onto Wilshire Boulevard much too quickly and had to touch the brakes to keep from losing control. Having to touch the brakes always made the demon fume.

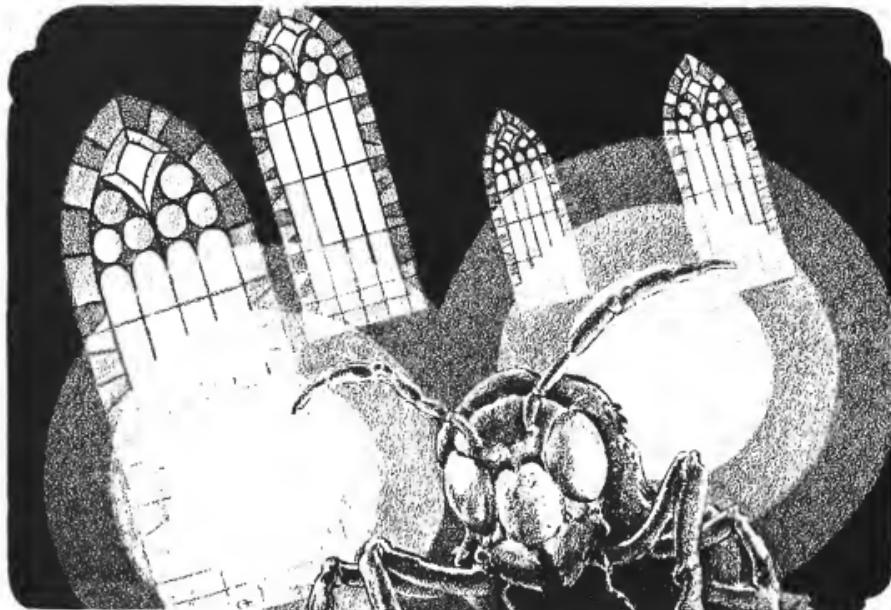
Too angry to drive, it dissolved the insect body and simply possessed the Corvette. For some reason the

car always performed better under simple demonic possession; but, for the demon, there was no longer any real challenge involved. So, after about three blocks, Adrammelech re-materialized as a gigantic, brown, thorn-covered squid and took manual control of the Corvette once again.

He roared up and down rows of narrow residential streets at close to fifty miles an hour, just *waiting* for someone to step out from behind a bush and off the curb. In a series of beautiful, quick, sharp turns the demon rolled up onto the sidewalk in an attempt to catch a cat asleep on one of the freshly-cut lawns. At the last minute the cat shot off into the bushes and avoided destruction, and the demon swung the Corvette off the curb and back onto the asphalt. Just in time to see a wrong-way driver turn onto the narrow one-way street.

Because of his rapid residential zig-zagging, the demon happened to be going the right way up the street, so the driver of the oncoming car was obviously very drunk or very lost. Adrammelech accelerated.

The gap between the two cars narrowed quickly — it was as though the other car was accelerating as well. The Corvette raced through an intersection and was out of the residential area — the street widened but remained one-way, and the speedometer needle in the Corvette climbed to sixty-five miles an hour. The other car was now definitely accelerating.



Adrammelech laughed his horrible laugh. In just a few seconds the driver of the approaching car would be dead, pressed into nothingness in the interior of his own machine.

The Corvette was twenty yards from the wrong-way driver when the demon could distinguish the make of the car — a blood-red '32 Ford three-window coupe, with a brightly polished full-race engine exposed. The windows were heavily tinted so the car's driver could not be seen. The Ford's front license plate frame said **DAMNATION IS THE ONLY WAY** in two-inch-high sparkling red letters, punctuated with an inverted pitchfork instead of an exclamation point. The plate itself read: **THE WORM**.

Both cars swerved to opposite sides of the road, tires shrieking across the asphalt, spraying street-gravel and sending up clouds of white smoke. The black Corvette and the red Ford slid to a stop at exactly the same moment.

Adrammelech elongated his neck and craned it over the back of the seat, watching the Ford and waiting to see if it was going to take off again. The Corvette's engine was humming almost inaudibly, so the demon could hear the loud, thunder-like revving of the other car. Exhaust fumes were jetting out of the Ford's tail pipe, dissipating the last traces of tire-smoke from around the car's wheels. The front wheels turned and the car began to pull around slowly, behind the Corvette.

A fat man on a Harley-Davidson drove through the intersection, slowing down to look at the two stopped cars, then speeding up again, uninterested. The motorcycle disappeared as it took a turn back toward the residential area, and once again the demons were alone on the street.

Now the Ford had pulled up right beside the Corvette. Its immense engine roared. The tinted window on the Ford's passenger side rolled down just a crack and Mötley Crüe's *Shout at the Devil* exploded out of high-powered speakers, pouring out into the empty street.

The pilot of the red coupe revved the engine in a slow succession of long powerful counts — oooone. . . . twoooooo. . . .

On the third rev the rear tires on both cars began to smoke against the street as the vehicles rushed forward. The street was barely wide enough to accommodate both of them, and an accidental swerve of mere inches would send one of them into the line of cars parked along the curb.

The Ford began to edge ahead of the Corvette, its engine moaning like a burning soul. Adrammelech could still hear the music coming from the Ford's speakers. The speedometer needle vibrated frantically at seventy miles an hour.

Something small and furry darted out from behind a parked car and the Corvette pressed it into the asphalt before it could make a sound. That put the demon in a better mood and he squeezed a little more

speed out of the car. Now he was even with the Ford.

The two cars came up on Hollywood Boulevard like rockets, and Adrammelech swung right, onto the wider street. The Ford swerved with it, keeping perfect pace. The cars raced side by side, less than a foot apart.

There were still a few other cars on the street, most of them cruising at fifteen miles an hour or less. The silhouettes driving the cars were slumped down low in their seats — arms dangled out of the car windows, trailing lines of thin gray smoke from smoldering cigarette tips.

Mann's Chinese Theater loomed up on the left side of the street, flashing neon reds, yellows, and greens. The Ford drove its immense front bumper into the back of a slow-moving sedan and forced it onto the sidewalk and into the theater ticket booth. Glass shattered everywhere and neon sparked and smoked.

Adrammelech had driven the Corvette onto the sidewalk on his side of the street, destroying two bus stops and sending people diving through the glass of shop windows.

Both cars came back onto the street at Vine, resuming the race, their front ends now utter wrecks.

Adrammelech could feel the Ford beginning to pull away again and realized that if he was going to win the race, he was going to have to do it quickly. The Corvette would not be able to hold its own against the Ford for a long stretch.

The shriek of police sirens filled the night, coming from every direction, and a twisting line of squad cars pulled onto the street less than a mile behind them. The Ford's engine roared. In a moment it would be ahead of him, and he would not be able to find the speed to pull up to it again.

The Corvette turned hard right down a narrow, palm-tree-lined street. It was his only chance — he wasn't fast enough for the Ford, so he was going to have to try to out-drive it. But there could be no mistakes, because if either car had to slow down or stop here, there would be no getting back home.

The Ford followed the Corvette hesitantly into the series of dark, narrow streets known as the Church District. Over a dozen churches — Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and *Catholic* — lurked at every corner and around every turn. Driving off the street here, for any reason, was simple suicide.

Gigantic, spired silhouettes loomed up from behind even the tallest trees, some of them like red-brick ghosts from the Middle Ages. Immense stained-glass cathedral windows cast their faint glow through the bare tree branches.

Adrammelech slowed to fifty miles an hour and unlatched his windows. He was currently in the shape of a skinless, six-foot-tall sewer rat. He took a turn too sharply and had to touch the brakes, and he grew weak with terror at even the slight slowing of the Corvette. The churches seemed to be leaning toward each other across the street, closing in on him and trying to trap him. He came out of the turn and accelerated again.

The Ford was right by his side, its engine purring almost effortlessly at the low speed. The Ford's windows slowly untinted and an immense glistening cockroach pressed its face against the clear glass for an instant before turning away. Even Adrammelech found the demon gruesome. The cockroach held up a twisted five-fingered hand with one finger turned up. It shook the hand violently at the Corvette, as though to make its point more strongly. Then, to Adrammelech's horror, the Ford began to pull ahead again.

Adrammelech smashed out the side window and leaned a rapidly bloating purple-jelly head out of it. He edged the Corvette over until it was only a few inches away from the Ford. Then the demon leaned out of the car just a little farther and exploded the immense dripping, swelling mass of purple jelly.

Putrescence covered the speeding Ford like a bubbling blanket — foaming over the back window and roof, then dripping down in a thick ooze over the front windshield and side windows. There was no way that the cockroach would be able to see through that mess.

Adrammelech spun the steering wheel hard left and bumped the back of the Ford violently. The red car weaved out of control in front of the Corvette and off to the far side of the street.

The blood-red Ford coupe, covered with purple muck, rumbled to a stop on the front lawn of the largest church in the entire district.

Adrammelech watched the horrible scene in his rearview mirror as he sped off down the street — the Ford imploded like a slowly crushing tin can as the immense church sucked the car in toward it. The cockroach-demon shrieked as it was crushed, and Adrammelech could see its long insect arms reaching out through flattening window frames, scratching at the church lawn and sending up clumps of grass and mud.

Then the lawn opened like a gigantic dark mouth and swallowed the Ford up entirely. The ground closed up again and the only sounds from behind the Corvette were the brushing of dead leaves against the sidewalks and the rattling fronds of the palm trees along the sides of the street.

Adrammelech got out of the Church District quickly and headed for the highway, staying clear of the wailing sirens of searching police cars.

A quarter mile before the on ramp the Corvette passed a fast-moving Harley-Davidson chopper being driven by absolutely nothing. The seat was empty and the handlebars seemed to move at the whim of the air.

Adrammelech leaned out his broken window with the nearest thing to a human face he could come up with in his fatigue, and shouted at the demon on the Harley.

"That's brilliant, you irresponsible idiot! Go ahead and call attention to yourself! Ruin it for all of us, why don't you!"

Adrammelech fumed. He was so upset that he missed his turn and mistakenly drove up the highway off ramp. A lone Mack truck was barreling along in the number two lane.

The demolished Corvette was no longer of any use to the demon — its wheels rattled from striking too many curbs, the engine rasped, the gears clattered and clicked when they were shifted. He would have to find a new vehicle.

He drove the Corvette into the number two lane and accelerated toward the truck. He'd get rid of the car and have some fun at the same time. But then he'd have to be getting back to the garage, to reset the alarm clock and rewind the invocation tape for next time.

The Corvette rammed the truck head on, and the demon sat back in the seat to enjoy the collision. The Corvette flattened under the Mack's first set of wheels and the demon laughed hysterically as he felt the truck tipping over into the beginning of what was sure to be a wonderful flaming crash.

Without warning the demon began to grow cold. It stiffened and shrieked in terror, not knowing what was happening and trying to dissolve itself and get out of the wreckage of the Corvette. It was powerless. The demon felt itself beginning to crystallize. By the time it realized what was destroying it, time had run out.

The truck rolled over and smashed down against the highway, and the demon Adrammelech shattered into a million shards of sparkling black glass.

The truck burned like a furnace because of its cargo. It had rolled twice, finally lying over on its side and blocking all four lanes. The logo on the truck's cargo shell was facing upward, and the tall calligraphy lettering sparkled under the glow of the highway lamps.

#### SAVE YOUR SOUL... READ THE WORD

By the time the fire department got there, half the Bibles had already burned. The rest were ruined by the water used to put the fire out.

The crushed wreckage of the black Corvette, full of sparkling, almost powdered black glass, was hauled to the nearest junk yard and left there to rust. Ω

## HANGMAN'S HAIKU

A taut rope, creaking  
Like the rigging of a ship:  
A soul sails Hellward.

— J. D. Hunt

# THE NARROW HOUSE

by Robert Sampson

illustration by Jason Van Hollander

Empty, clean, silent, the narrow house sat within a row of similar houses, a book on a shelf of books, a shell in a row of shells, a single grave in a row of graves, lifted up on end, faced in brownish-red brick, waiting for occupancy, silent, clean, empty.

Inside the house, the late afternoon sunshine glowed across a floor of old wide boards. The Emorys sat together on the landing of the second floor, dabbling their feet in the pool of light.

"We won't be in this place all that long," Sam said. He leaned back, as thin and long-legged as a sea-marsh bird. "We'll be out of Charlottesville in three months. Tops, three months."

"You're sure? You're positive?" Janet said, faintly mocking.

"Sure I'm sure. It'll only take three months to coax our Lancaster branch into the world of computers. By the time I get that done, Mr. Hinton will have retired. He's already signed his papers for the first of September. So then, we'll move to Harrisburg and I finally get promoted and you can have the best house in Camp Hill. Or wherever the mansions are."

All this she had heard before. Listening to his confident voice narrate their future, she felt the familiar tensions clamping her mouth and eyes. One day, she thought, the marks would become visible, engraved by his optimism upon her face.

In her small, tight voice, she said: "We won't need to unpack everything."

"Just the coffee pot and some pillows."

"I guess we can make do. It's such a little house, isn't it? So up and down, and narrow."

"The grave," he said in a voice of hollow menace, "is narrower still."

Grimming, he slipped an arm around her shoulders. She rose, allowing his arm to slip away, and crossed the landing into the bright emptiness of their future bedroom. Three tall windows in the rear wall let in a cascade of sunlight. The room smelled strongly of new wallpaper and fresh paint. Janet's shoes clattered on the shining floor.

Sam came to stand beside her. From the windows, they looked down into the narrow back yard, defined by a tall wooden fence. Directly beneath them sprawled fat rose bushes flecked with pink bloom.

"Your uncle must have spent a lot of money fixing this place up," she said. "Why doesn't he rent it?"

"Can't rent it," Sam said. "An old row house practi-

cally in the middle of a business district? Who'd want it? I'm surprised Uncle Bill spent a nickel on it. He didn't want the place when great-grandmother willed it to him. Said nobody who lived in it ever had any luck. 'Course that was after Aunt Della died."

"That makes it a great place for us to live in," she said, more sharply than intended.

"Well, it's rent free," he said, using that carefully soothing voice she hated. "Besides, we're not really living here. We're just visiting a couple of months. You have to live in the place before the jinx bites you."

"The people who lived here — did they have bad luck?"

"Oh, Lordy, yes!" he cried dramatically. "Terrible luck. They had to live here in Charlottesville and commute to Lancaster."

She almost smiled but not quite. "Oh, it's all right," she said dispiritedly. "It's a pretty house. I like it."

Sam looked down on her, his mouth hardening at the undisguised regret in her voice. His arm tightened around her shoulders, just briefly, just barely enough to notice. But he said cheerfully enough: "Welcome to Pennsylvania, Land of Free Housing."

She turned away, her mouth a cold thin thread. He was forever joking, forever facetious, forever inconsequential. His humor, so amusing only two years before, now seemed a device to avoid any serious emotion. Marrying him had been an inexplicable blunder. She had been self-deluded, tricked by hope, too much afraid of time as thirty passed and she remained alone. And now this. Humor that did not please her. Affection she could not return. It grew ever harder to return even civility. Whatever the future held, it probably would not include a mansion in Camp Hill.

They moved in five days later. The movers thumped through the house like uncontrollable mechanisms, sweating and loud. Their contemptuous eyes challenged her to ask that bed, bureau, boxes be carried to the second floor.

"Lady wants this upstairs, Donnie."

Donnie, bitterly eying the stairs: "Awwww, crap."

Their feet hammered the shining floors. They jabbered a continual stream of inanities:

"You ever been in a crazy place like this one?"

"It's a tall one."

"Built like a mine shaft."

"Straight up and down."



"It's a wonder."

Finally they were gone. Then for the next two days, it was chaos, a jungle of boxes, clothing, packing paper in crumpled hills, all heaped in rooms too small, lighted by bulbs the size of pigeon eggs in remote ceiling fixtures. The leg of her best table had been savagely scarred. Their two small rugs, enormously large for these minute rooms, lapped eighteen inches up the walls. The only closet upstairs was not in the bedroom but in the hall, and so shallow that coat hangers would not fit.

Janet banged the closet door viciously and stamped across the hall to wash her hands. She felt itchy and soiled, as if the dust had melted into her skin, encasing her in a delicate gray crust like a seed.

She regarded herself despairingly in the mirror. In three months, all this mess to go through again. More surly movers. More damaged furniture. The future rose up at her like an angry dog.

Downstairs, Sam whistled destructively through "Pretty Baby." His blond hair sticking straight up, no doubt. His long face concentrated as he crashed a hammer repeatedly against something undoubtedly fragile.

But there was no use telling him, he was that stubborn; let him smash it apart, then come to her with that feeble grin explaining how it happened, till her face burnt and pressure beat inside her head.

Seeking coolness and silence, she entered the bedroom and pushed up a window. Leaning out, she critically surveyed the yard below. Only a week and the grass already needed cutting. It looked knee deep. They had no mower, of course. Maybe Sam could rent one. Another unexpected expense, capping all the other unexpected expenses.

From some distant place, a baby howled thinly. It was a cruel, persistent sound like the whine of a chainsaw. She wondered how the mother could endure that abrasion of noise?

Well, she had to. Have a baby and there you are — stuck.

She gazed glumly down into the yard. There you are, alone in Pennsylvania in a town the size of a wart. The back of her head throbbed. She felt half sick. Why hadn't they stayed in Fort Wayne? Bill had a good job in Fort Wayne, but no, he wanted a better one. So here they were, in Wartsville, Pennsylvania. Not knowing a soul. She'd known everybody in Fort Wayne for twenty-two years.

No, twenty-three years, remember your birthday. Twenty-three my God years old, alone in Wartsville. Stuck with the baby.

Self-pity burnt her eyes. The back yard looked like an uncombed head. Great flakes of paint peeled from the wooden fence. Over by the tree, a board had simply rotted off. Rotted and fallen clear off.

She felt rotten, too, and ready to fall.

Sam was calling from downstairs.

"What?" she cried. "What is it? What, what, what?"

And rushed from the room. And clattered furiously down the stairs.

The following afternoon, Janet walked half a block to downtown Charlottesville. At the Blue Pigeon Supermarket, she bought half a pound of coffee and a packet of Lebanon bologna. When she requested a check-cashing card, the clerk eyed her with sharp suspicion. She left the supermarket feeling obscurely guilty. It was as if a shameful memory had stirred at the bottom of her mind.

She moved hesitantly along the sidewalk. Sunlight bit at her eyes. Near the corner, a deeply-recessed glass door displayed the name "Archimedes Soft Pretzel Company" in worn gold paint and archaic lettering. Amused, she entered a large room filled with empty shining display cases and the smell of warm bread. A dispirited young woman, drooping by the cash register, slowly filled Janet's order for four of the big pretzels, glinting with salt.

As she squeezed the final pretzel into a sack, the young woman muttered, with a kind of frightened curiosity, "Isn't that a creepy place where you're living? Have you seen anything yet?"

Janet firmly laid down two dollar bills. "Anything what?" The young woman was a complete stranger.

"You know. Anything."

A fierce gray woman strode from the back room, saying sharply: "Charlie needs help with the pangs." She seized Janet's dollars and offered change.

"I wonder what she was talking about?" Janet remarked, as the girl slouched glumly away. "It sounded interesting."

The gray woman's eyes flickered remotely over Janet's face. "I wasn't listening."

Like fun you weren't, Janet thought, banging the door. She walked slowly past a small drugstore whose windows were entirely covered by advertisements for baby products. So I'm living in a haunted house, am I? Everybody knows it but me. Reflectively she pulled one of the pretzels apart and bit into its soft saltiness.

I wonder what kind of a ghost we got, she thought. I hope it's cute.

She felt vaguely depressed, as if tomorrow she would have the flu.

That evening, Sam returned late from the office to find her stretched silent and grim across the bed. As he entered the room, her eyes lifted in a stab of cold desperation. She turned away her head.

He knelt by her side: "What is it, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You aren't feeling well?"

"I'm all right."

"No," he said. "Come on now. Tell me."

"I'm all right."

His fingers slipped gently across her unresponsive shoulders. "You've been overdoing it," he said. "You're trying to do two weeks' work in two days."

Silence, across which intruded the harsh sound of her breathing.

"Why don't we go out and get a salad bar tonight? It's too hot to cook."

"I hate it," she said. Her voice was remote, as if she spoke of uninteresting things. "I hate it here."

"It's hard to move away from home. I know. I feel like that too, sometimes."

"We should never have moved," she said. "We should have stayed in Fort Wayne."

"Fort Wayne?" He stared blankly down at her. "Why Fort Wayne?"

"Why," she said, "that's where . . ."

Confusion clouded her face, making her nose seem longer, sharper than ever.

He said: "You mean Dayton?"

Her hand crept slowly across her lips. "Yes," she whispered. "Dayton."

He bent over her, apprehension like a hot cloud in his eyes. "Where'd you get Fort Wayne from? That's Aunt Della's home town. Before she married Bill and moved here."

Janet, unmoving, eyes closed, whispered: "I hate it here. Nothing's like the way it was."

Late that night, she slipped from bed and roamed the halls and stairways of the narrow house. Downstairs was dark as blindness. She moved silently through it, barefooted and listening, fingers slipping along the walls. Far off she heard the baby wail.

On the second floor, the cry seemed louder, calling her in its misery. Moonlight pooled on the landing. Twenty feet down the hall, a slash of shadow concealed the door to the front bedroom. Her heart felt tiny and cold, a stone in a glacier. She crept carefully toward that door, listening. She could no longer hear the baby.

Tentatively, she pushed at the bedroom door. It swung partially open. She pushed it again with a firmness that was part fear. The door swung silently back, and sudden moonlight washed across her face.

She stood listening. She could hear only the delicate whisper of her own breath. Nothing more.

The room was piled with unopened cartons of their possessions. Against the silver-blue glass of the moonlit window, box edges were sharply outlined. Moonlight angled across the room, spilling past her into the hall.

Finally she turned to go. As she did so, she looked down. Felt a single cold pulse strike from the center of her body. For some brief fraction of time, it had seemed that she cast two shadows across the moonlit floor.

In the morning after Sam left for work, she stood irresolutely on the second-floor landing. Boxes in the front bedroom to be opened and searched. The kitchen to be thoroughly scrubbed and waxed. And more wax needed up here. The movers, she noticed grimly, had completely messed up the polish on the stairs and landing.

Too much to do. Too much. Her eyes half closed.

Without warning, the bright world rushed away and despair flooded into her. When she was a small child on Florida's East Coast, a storm wave had rushed over her. Trapped and strangling, she had been whirled tumbling through a boil of sand and water, helpless within the rush. Like that terrible wave, emotion gripped her now — a weight of hopelessness and regret, rage and loss, pouring through her like burning fluid. Unendurable.

The baby was crying.

She felt stupefied. Her body felt inert as death. In a rage of misery, she forced her thick legs to movement. Dragged herself away from the stairs. Lumbed slowly into the hall, one heavy step at a time. Plodded up the hall, past the master bedroom, past the bathroom, dragging her shoulder and arm along the wall. Liquid fire flooded her eyes. She could not see. She did not want to see. Grief stunned her.

Far away in Fort Wayne, familiar faces laughed and familiar voices called out, warm and well-remembered. The air like candy. Color and joy. Friendship and delight.

In this narrow prison house, the baby shrieked again. Its voice was the sound of a bleeding wound. She changed the foul diaper, her fingers clumsy. Single tears burnt her cheeks. Her mind was black, all black and terrible, like a hole in the earth.

The baby shrieked.

Fury lifted her. The room went unreal. She forced both hands against that howling mouth, damming back the sound. The baby's face flushed scarlet. Its minute arms flailed. Then they did not. In a convulsion of guilt, she jerked her hands away. Bending forward over the little bed, fingers against her mouth, she stared, nauseated.

Strength drained out of her. Her gross limbs shook. She sprawled heavily back against the wall.

Downstairs the front door slammed. From the foot of the stairs, Sam's voice:

"Hello, angel, I'm back."

Deep movement in her mind, as if a great door slowly closed. As if heavy rain slowly stopped.

She stood in the front bedroom amid cardboard cartons of their possessions. One box she had torn open. Bright sweaters scattered the floor.

She moved unsteadily into the hall, not understanding the lightness of her body.

From the foot of the steps, Sam grinned up at her.

"How was your day?" he called.

"You're home early."

"It's after five," he said.

Late afternoon sunlight slanted through the bedroom windows. She still wore her nightgown and her hair had not been combed.

After dinner that night, they sat together in the little downstairs living room. All four floor lamps had been turned on. Hard white light poured mercilessly across

the gold carpet. Janet sat stiffly upright in a straight chair, holding a green mug of coffee. She wore a yellow blouse and a cocoa-colored skirt, with large wooden beads around her neck and a belt with a massive wooden buckle. She looked carefully arranged, as if prepared for a television interview.

Sam flopped down in a chair and tugged it around to face her. "Listen," he said, seeming bitterly uncomfortable. "Listen, I've been thinking. Why don't you take a couple of weeks vacation and go back to Dayton? Take a rest. Visit with your mother. Couple of weeks and I'll have this place pretty well fixed up — or maybe I can hunt us up a nicer place in Lancaster. They should have lots of nice places in Lancaster. We just didn't have time to find them. Just let me look around for a while and see what I'm able to find."

Janet finished her coffee and placed the empty mug on a small table and folded her long hands gracefully. The rigid sweetness of her smile persisted.

She said: "Your Aunt Della and Uncle Bill, they had a baby, didn't they?"

Sam widened his eyes and rubbed his nose. "Did they?"

"The baby died," she said.

"I just don't know about that."

"It wouldn't stop crying. She tried to hush it up and accidentally smothered it. Probably accidentally."

"Where in the world did you hear something like that?"

She sat erect in the straight, polished chair, a straight, polished smile on her lips. "I was there," she said.

While she explained, Sam sat grinning rigidly at her, his face without color, harshly lined.

Long after Sam fell asleep, she lay wide-eyed in the darkness. He had thrown one arm protectively across her, but she did not feel protected. She felt in danger. She felt a cold, light falling sensation through her middle, and tight temples, and cold patches across her skin. She was afraid. She was a ringing hollow containing nothing but fear.

In books and movies, people always knew what to do. Get a priest; throw Holy water; pray. Hold up a sprig of something. Be gone, reciting a formula of exorcism.

Be gone what? There was nothing here. A mood, a sound, a feeling. A confusion in her own mind. A blurring of who she was, as if another personality had partly dissolved into her like instant coffee dissolving in water.

Her fingers dug against the sheets.

That's what was horrible and nasty. That's what was disgusting. Not being torn to pieces by something with scales and teeth. What was horrible was to fade from your own mind. To know you're fading, memory by memory, canceled, at last, the way a computer cancels a line. Flick. Gone.

Her fingers gripped the sheets. Her mind circled in

fear. She lay under the shelter of his arm and it was not enough.

Toward dawn she slept.

The kitchen clock said nearly seven. Sam ate toast and said in a guilty voice: "I got a meeting first thing this morning. But I'll be back in a couple of hours. OK?"

Janet nodded wordlessly. She felt as if she drifted downward from a high place through a glare of light. Her eyes ached.

"You'll be all right?" Sam asked.

She nodded.

"God knows," he said, "I don't suppose haunts come around in the morning, do they?"

"I hope not," she said.

After the door closed behind Sam, the exhilaration of decision poured through her like cold wind. She would leave for Dayton now. At once. Her mind leaped across the future, as she methodically washed the breakfast dishes and put the kitchen to order. She felt rushed and excited; her lungs could not seem to take in enough air. She moved slowly through the narrow house, looking at it for the last time. Her mind glowed with tightly restrained emotion that felt vaguely unpleasant, as if she were behaving in a way she would later recall with humiliation.

She pulled open the front door. Thin morning sunlight streamed across the floor, worn by years of passage. She stared down at it. Only a few days ago, it had glowed so brightly under its coating of polish.

Her eyes narrowed. Crossing to the stairway she peered up at the wall. Sunlight fell across faded beige paint beneath which showed a vague wallpaper pattern, like the outlines of a drowned city. The wood of the stairs and banisters, clean but lusterless, had obviously not been polished for years.

Yesterday she had seen it all newly painted and polished, the wallpaper crisp and bright, smelling freshly clean.

She darted halfway up the stairs and thrust her face close to the sunlit wall. She strained to detect any trace of redecoration.

Nothing. Paint and paper, chipped, faded, soiled. Wood worn, begrimed, scarred, gouged, scraped. Exactly as a house this age would look, given no refurbishment.

"I can't understand," Sam had said, "why Uncle Bill would spend a nickel on it."

But he hadn't.

Nothing had been done. Nothing at all.

Some part of her mind slewed into slow revolving motion, as if a fundamental restraint had broken.

She ran upstairs, touching the walls. In their bedroom, her cold fingers slipped along the window sills, lifting up chips of paint, old paint, old broken paint. The floor had no more gloss than a worn-out carpet. The continued slow spiraling in her head nauseated her.

Returning to the hall, she wrenched open the hall

closet, began pulling blouses and skirts from hangers. Her cold hands gripped inaccurately. Back in the bedroom, she layered garments into her blue bag. As she packed, her mind wove fantastic ribbons of words. One bag would not hold much, but the rest could be shipped to Dayton later. Sam (Bill, cried her mind) could do that. Just put them on the bus. He could do that.

He would do that even for a wife who ran away home to Fort Wayne (Dayton). Unless he forgot all about her. Forgot they had ever been married. Forgot what she looked like. Whose clothes are these? Aunt Della's (Janet's)? Who was this fugitive woman. I don't remember. Tall. She was tall (heavy). She killed our baby, you know.

No, I did not. I killed nothing. Only this bitter marriage begun with such promise, ended far from home, alone in this narrow house.

From down the hall drifted the thin whining of a baby.

"Dear God!" Janet gasped. She snatched at a pair of shoes, slapped the bag shut, heaved it from the bed. The weight hurt her fingers.

She stumbled into the hallway. Sunlight spilled across fresh wallpaper and wood gleaming warmly with polish.

The bag thudded to the floor. Her body drew into itself like a collapsing sun.

The baby began to scream.

She stood staring down the staircase. Sunlight lighted the top steps. The lower stairs lay in an ambiguous gray light, confused and inexact. Immensely long, the staircase. Sixty years long. Today's sunlight at the top; below that, the past. The dreadful past. She could not think about the past.

The baby shrieked.

Fear chilled her throat and stomach.

She swung about to face the bedroom. She knew with great clarity that she should snatch up her bag and race from the house. Outside, the bus would come through the bright air. At the end of the highway was Fort Wayne and the joyous life she had abandoned so many months ago.

Instead she ignored the bag. She began to inch down the hallway toward the front bedroom. Small teeth showed behind her grinning lips. The crying grew intense, waves of searing sound. She moved unsteadily, touching the wall with her palm.

At the door to the bedroom, she stopped. The infant's desperate screaming surged all around her. She felt one eyelid shivering, as she pushed open the door.

Inside, a pink-walled room, filled with heavy brown furniture. Neatly hand-stitched cloth pictures circled the walls. By the door stood a huge, old-fashioned crib, broad and high and frothing with covers. Over one end arched a small canopy, merry with pink ribbons. Beneath the canopy shrieked an elaborately gowned baby, its body rigid with fury.

Outside the window, traffic droned in the street. She moved toward the crib, smiling the hard white smile of fear.

The baby's face, scarlet against the white bedding, jerked toward her. Its eyelids flickered open, exposing eyes like bits of black glacier. She had the startled impression that something quite self-controlled was examining her. That it was contemptuous of her distress and amused by her pity. Before she could express those impressions as words, its eyes clamped tight. The mouth gaped. The baby screamed.

She found herself in the hallway. She had slammed the door and jerked away as if the wood had bitten her. Behind the door, the baby's voice rose in a shriek of rage.

Janet began to edge back down the hall, eyes fixed on the door. Heart beat shook her body as a freight train shakes the crossing. She knew with sick certainty that the baby could hear the violence of her heart.

She retreated down the hall, until her back pressed painfully against the protecting wall. The bedroom windows spilled pale sunshine across the blue bag on the landing. The bag cast a firm rectangle of shadow. Bright bits of dust, like tiny suns, glinted in the sunlight. The air smelled warm, a little stuffy. In the bedroom, a crumpled white sack projected from the wastebasket by the dresser.

She looked eagerly at these details. They were firm and clear and unchanging, a reality of exact detail and specific surfaces. Comforting, concrete reality. But her body continued to shake and her sweating hands smeared the wall. She peered past the bag down the terrible chasm of the stairs, wondering how she could get down them without falling.

And found herself staring directly into a man's eyes.

She could not quite make out his face. It was either Sam or Bill. The thickened air of the stairwell blurred his features. He called out, his voice high and strange. Even sixty years away, she could hear the misery in his voice.

Sick instability ran through her. She felt something at the underside of her mind loosen. She felt a rush of long-restrained emotion, fetid and dangerous, like contaminated water.

It was familiar emotion. She knew it well. Like the face of the man in the stairwell, it was slightly out of focus. As if two images or two emotions had almost, not quite, been superimposed, so that from behind the first protruded the outline of the second.

She recognized despair, so like her own. Similar resentment and sense of dislocation. The same corroding unhappiness and regret.

The man below called and his feet thudded on the stairs. Those sounds seemed far off and of no importance.

Two sets of emotions, so much alike.

Common feelings that should merge to one.

For shared unhappiness was better than unhappiness endured alone.

"Surely," she thought, "this isn't true."

Down the hall, the front bedroom pulsed like a great heart. She had only to take a few steps and open the door and step inside. To join, to merge, to share.

A feeling of airlessness closed over her. She might have been strangling in white foam. She heard her voice lift in a ridiculous squeak:

"For God's sake, no."

She twisted blindly away from the wall, and plunged heavily against Sam as he ran up out the stairwell.

"What is it?" he cried.

Ignoring him, she bent over her bag, fumbled with the catches. Her fingers, nerveless as icicles, felt thin and easily snapped.

The bag fell open. She dumped its bright contents across the floor. Jerking the bag wide open, she lifted it high between outstretched arms, shook it defiantly at the bedroom door.

"I'm staying with Sam," she shouted. "We're going to Harrisburg."

She slammed the bag down on the landing.

"Janet," Sam whispered. "Janet." She was shocked by his anguished voice. He said gently: "Let's get a cup of coffee. Let's sit down. You'll feel better if you sit down."

"I feel wonderful," she said.

He took her arm, lightly, lightly, his fingers floating across her skin. A white look distorted his face. When she reached up to smooth his grooved cheek, he stepped suddenly back, staring at her. His foot plunged into the open bag.

The bag grated as it slipped from the landing.

For an instant, his lanky figure poised over the hollow of the stairs. It seemed a playful position, as if he could recover his balance whenever he wished. He shouted urgently. Teeth shone in his blanched face. Then he was gone.

The stairway filled with sound.

The stairway filled with silence.

At the bottom, Janet flung herself down beside him. Something was wrong with the shape of his head. His fingers jerked against the floor before they became still.

She strained herself against him. Love dissolved her. She was stunned by love, as if a star had exploded at the center of her body. Behind that flaring blaze, grief extended its rending hooks. That, she knew, would be very terrible, more agonizing even than love.

The sound of a baby crying roused her.

She looked up blinking, her crusted face loose. Her legs had gone numb and she had to clutch the banister and pull erect, hand over hand.

The dead man lay at her feet, his eyes enigmatic. Clinging to the banister, she looked down on the unreality of his face.

Someone distinctly said: "Now you're free."

The baby's crying became a continuous shriek.

She stood in the twilight of the narrow house, listening to the baby scream, feeling the weight of her body, feeling the edges of her mind flare to scarlet, as fire in the fields flares before the wind. Ω

# Hell Book

## OUR LADY OF THE THORNS

The Grand Duchess of Hades, consort of Belphegor, eminent demon. Sorcerers summon her to enhance the agony of imprisoned foes.



Illustration by Brian Van Hollander © 2012

# A FLY CALLED JESUS

by Chet Williamson

illustrated by Philip H. Williams

At first Albie Byrne didn't believe the fly when it said that it was Jesus come for the second time.

Of course it didn't really say it was Jesus, since flies have no capacity for speech. It spelled out the message by walking in the sand. It had been a pretty normal day up to that point, full of sun, warm breezes, and loneliness for Albie Byrne, like most Sundays in the summer. Around ten he would wake up; around noon he would get bored; and around 1:30 he would leave his tight, steaming apartment and drive his '79 Chevy Nova twenty miles north to the state park, where he would swim in the lake, lie on the sand, eat several dollars worth of concession-stand hot-dogs and Nutty Buddys, and ogle the women old and young, one piece and two.

He was lying on his back, admiring a young woman with Latin eyes, Mediterranean skin, and a strategically cut, two piece suit held together by the most fragile strips of fabric imaginable, when the fly landed on his nose. At first he thought the black blotch intruding on his vision was the result of a fortunately snapped lower strap that exposed the beach nymph's hirsute and forbidden cleft to his wanton gaze. But when the supposed tuft started to rove over the girl's magnificently tanned abdomen, he tightened his focus.

His eyes crossed upon the fly at the end of his nose, the largest specimen of the species he had ever seen, more like a small hawk than a fly. He let out a whoop, swung both hands toward his nose, and rolled off his blanket into the sand, his hands flailing.

"Mommy?" said a tiny voice that nonetheless managed to carry a good twenty yards outward on all sides from its owner, "what's that fat man doing?" Faces turned, dozens of them.

"Shh, dear. It's not nice to call someone fat," said the child's mother.

"But he is, Mommy . . ."

"Spade a spade," said the child's father approvingly, not looking up from his *Sporting News*. If he had, he would have seen Albie Byrne turn crimson with embarrassment, the beach nymph turn away with disgust, and the fly turn a few barrel rolls over Albie's head.

Slowly Albie crawled back onto his brown army blanket, and slowly the crowd within the twenty foot radius of Albie's frenzied contortions and the little girl's piercing voice turned back to their own business. Albie lay on (or over) his distended stomach, eyes cast down to the soft gray sand just off the protective island of his blanket. The fly landed a foot and a half in front of his nose.

*Shit!* thought Albie. *Shit shit shit I'm gonna smash your ass, you little bastard!* And very carefully Albie picked up a section of the local Sunday paper. Noticing that it was the comics, he set it back on the blanket and picked up real estate instead, rolling it into a tight cylinder and raising it stealthily above his head for the kill.

The fly was still on the sand, but so was something else. There, spelled out in a graceful script, were the letters, *S O R R*, and the fly was just finishing the tail of the *Y*. Then it leaped into the air and came down hard to make one final spot.

*SORRY*, it read, complete with a period.

*Sorry.* Written by a fly crawling through the sand, a fly that now stared up at him with complex eyes that he swore registered apology.

*Sorry?*

Albie looked up nervously, then to the left and right to see if anybody had noticed the little exercise in insectoid penmanship. He almost expected to hear a little voice pipe up, "Look, Mommy, that fat man's hallucinating."

But no, everyone was doing something worthwhile. No one was forced from boredom to watch Albie Byrne. The little girl was making sand castles by the shore, and the nymph was sucking on a Fudgsicle. Albie considered the symbolism for a moment, then turned back to the fly, who, to his amazement, had written more:

*— DIDN'T MEAN TO STARTLE YOU.*

Albie could only lie there, his lower jaw hanging slack, eyes bugging out of his skull. *"SORRY"* he could have accepted, charging it off to the old infinite number of monkeys and typewriters theory. But *"SORRY. DIDN'T MEAN TO STARTLE YOU,"* with the apostrophe in the right place could not be attributed to random fly trails.

Now the fly flew off the sand, diving and gliding over this handiwork and brushing it with wings and legs until it was expunged. Then he wrote:

*— PLEASE WIPE THE SAND CLEAN AFTER YOU READ IT. SAVES ME TIME.*

After a moment's hesitation, Albie reached out with a pudgy, trembling hand and smoothed the sand until the tiny grooves of script disappeared. The fly wrote:

*— THANK YOU, ALBIE. MY NAME IS JESUS.*

"Holy shit," muttered Albie Byrne.

The fly waited by the word, *"JESUS,"* for a few seconds, then began to laboriously clear the sand. Albie reached out and helped it. It wrote:



— LET'S GO DOWN TO THE END WHERE THERE'S MORE ROOM.

It rose into the air and began to buzz down the beach toward the area posted with **No Swimming** signs. Albie watched the little speck get smaller and smaller. When it was lost to sight he sprang up and ran after it, ignoring the cries of sunbathers whose bodies and blankets his plunging feet sprayed with sand.

In another minute he found himself at the end of the beach. The only people nearby were a teenage couple who had apparently sought the imperfect privacy of the no swimming area for some amorous dalliance.

Albie tried to avoid looking at their annoyed scowls as he sought the large and literate fly. Finally he saw a patch of sand on which had been written:

— HERE, ALBIE.

He walked over to it, and there was the fly sitting by the final *e*, making a large, black period. Unencumbered now by restrictions of space and the need to wipe the sand clean after every few words, the fly wrote rapidly:

— ARE YOU SURPRISED I KNEW YOUR NAME?

Albie started to answer, then turned and looked at the embracing couple fifteen yards away, who seemed to have forgotten his presence and were again attempting to suck out each others' tongues by the roots. Albie looked at the fly.

“Uh . . . yeah. Yeah. How'd you know my name?”

*Holy shit, he thought, I'm talking to a fly. I'm loony. I'm really really loony. Mom said this would happen if I kept beating off.*

The fly replied:

— I KNOW EVERYTHING. AND DON'T WORRY, ALBIE. YOU'RE NOT LOONY.

*And it's a telepathic fly!* thought Albie in panic. “How . . . wha— . . . how'd you do that?”

— I TOLD YOU I KNOW EVERYTHING. I AM JESUS, ALBIE, COME BACK TO THE WORLD ONCE MORE, AND I AM REVEALING MYSELF UNTO YOU. YOU ARE THE FIRST TO KNOW OF MY COMING.

“Oh, come on!” cried Albie Byrne in frustration, so loudly that the coupling couple gave him a withering glare and stalked into the more private confines of the woods. “Come on!” repeated Albie. “This isn't real — this is a trick!”

— IT IS NOT A TRICK.

“A fly can't be Jesus! A fly can't know everything!”

— I KNOW THAT YOU HAD THREE EGGS FOR BREAKFAST THIS MORNING, AND FOUR SLICES OF TOAST WITH WELCH'S GRAPE-ADE.

Albie's jaw hurtled dropped again. After a moment's thought he replied, “I know now. This is a dream. You know this stuff because I know it.”

— IF IT IS A DREAM, COULD I KNOW THINGS YOU DON'T?

“Heck, no.”

— DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY POPULAR VOTES THE PROHIBITION PARTY'S CANDIDATE FOR THE PRESIDENCY GOT IN 1904?

Albie frowned. "I didn't even know there was a Prohibition Party."

— THERE WAS, AND ITS CANDIDATE, SILAS C. SWALLOW, RECEIVED 258,535 POPULAR VOTES.

Albie's eyes narrowed. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

— LOOK IT UP. THE RECORDS SAY 258,536, BUT OTIS P. BIRD OF DETROIT VOTED TWICE. OF COURSE NO ONE KNOWS BUT ME. AND MY FATHER, NATURALLY. NOW DO YOU BELIEVE ME?

"No. No! Maybe I just made this all up in my dream!"

— I HATE TO TELL YOU THIS, ALBIE, BUT YOU DON'T HAVE THAT VIVID AN IMAGINATION, AND CERTAINLY NOT ONE VIVID ENOUGH TO IMAGINE ME COMING BACK AS A FLY.

Albie sighed. "You got a point," he told the fly. "But . . . but Jesus? A fly? Why a fly?"

— BECAUSE IT TAKES LITTLE FAITH TO FOLLOW A MAN, ESPECIALLY ONE AS SERENE, SELF-CONFIDENT, AND GOOD-LOOKING AS I WAS IN MY FIRST COMING. BUT TO FOLLOW A FLY? THAT TAKES GREAT FAITH.

"But why me? I don't have much faith, I never go to church or Sunday School —"

The fly interrupted with a loud buzz, and wrote:

— YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN. IT IS THAT SIMPLE. YOUR SOUL IS PURE, YOU ARE A VIRGIN,

*Not for want of trying*, thought Albie Byrne.

— AND YOU WILL FOLLOW MY GUIDANCE FAITHFULLY AND HONESTLY. YOU WILL BE MY DISCIPLE.

"Disciple." Albie read the word aloud. It had a nice ring to it.

— WILL YOU FOLLOW ME, ALBIE BYRNE? OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL?

Albie shivered a little. It was now or never. He could follow Jesus, be his chief disciple, or spend the rest of his life as a putz who blew the biggest chance of all.

But a fly? Oh well . . . "Yeah, okay, you got a deal."

— YOU MAY CALL ME JESUS.

Albie swallowed heavily, looking at the big black insect sitting on the sand. "Okay. you got a deal. . . . Jesus."

In his two-room apartment with bath, Albie Byrne sat at the kitchen table watching the fly as it hopped from letter to letter of the old Ouija board Albie used as a tray when he ate supper in front of the TV (which was almost every night). At first he had given the fly an old Smith-Corona typewriter, but its weight had not been enough to depress the keys. The fly had then spotted the Ouija board, landed on it, and Albie had gotten the idea pretty quickly, for Albie.

The Ouija board proved to be an excellent method of communication between the two, even though the fly had to respell some of the longer words. The fly devised a punctuation system of hopping once for a comma, twice for a period, and three times for a question mark. Any further vagaries of style would have been wasted on Albie.

Now Albie watched and responded to what the fly spelled:

— THE TIME HAS COME FOR A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH. THE FINAL DAYS ARE AT HAND.

"A hand? What's that?" asked Albie.

— AT [the fly paused] HAND.

"Oh, at hand. Wait a minute . . . Jesus." He still had trouble with the name. "You mean like the end of the world?" Albie felt a nervous burble in his stomach.

— THE END OF EVIL IN THE WORLD, YES.

"Like . . . like, Amma . . . Arma . . ."

— ARMAGEDDON.

"Yeah! Like a final battle between good'n bad? And the whole earth gets blown up?"

— RELAX, ALBIE. A BIT OF PROPAGANDA DEVISED BY MY EARLIER DISCIPLES TO TAKE THE FOCUS OFF THE WORLDLY AND PLACE IT ON THE ETERNAL.

"Hoo boy, *that's* a relief. But how's all this evil gonna be got rid of?"

— BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU SHALL DO FOR ME. "Me?"

— YES. I WISH FOR YOU TO BUILD ME AN ARC.

"Oh, come on," Albie said. "That's been done already. Besides, you spelled it wrong. How can you be Jesus and not know how to spell?"

— NOT AN ARK. AN ARC. AS IN ARC LIGHT.

"Like electrical? I'm no good at electrical stuff. I hate changing fuses."

— HAVE NO FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU. MY WORDS SHALL GUIDE YOU, AND I SHALL BE A LAMP UNTO YOUR FEET. NOW, HAVE YOU EVER DONE ANY SPOT WELDING?

"No."

— YOU CAN LEARN. HERE IS A LIST OF THINGS YOU SHALL NEED TO BUILD MY ARC.

The list was long and, for Albie, very confusing. "Where'll I get all this stuff?"

— AROUND. ELECTRICAL SUPPLY STORES, CHEMICAL HOUSES, HARDWARE STORES.

"Uh, what about money?"

— HOW MUCH DO YOU HAVE?

"Three hundred in savings. In Checking . . ." He took a seldom used checkbook from a kitchen drawer and turned to the last stub. "Thirty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents."

— CASH?

"About ten bucks."

— IT WILL SUFFICE. LOAVES AND FISHES.

"Huh?"

— THE RICH MAN, THE CAMEL, THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE.

Albie shook his head in confusion.

— I SHALL PAY YOU BACK, ALBIE. BUY THE THINGS TOMORROW.

When Albie went back to his apartment the following day, his car was packed with jars of chemicals, electrical instruments, plugs, wires, condensers, and batteries, none of which Albie knew a thing about. As he hauled the last box into the apartment, he said,

"Y'know, you've never told me what this stuff is for. I mean, what's this supposed to do anyway?"

— *IT WILL BRING MY KINGDOM UNTO THE WORLD, ALBIE. IT WILL POUR OUT ITS LIGHT TO SHINE UPON ALL MEN, GOOD AND EVIL ALIKE.*

"Oh. But what'll it do?"

— *YOURS IS NOT TO REASON WHY.*

Fortunately, Albie did not know the second line of the couplet. Instead he sighed and accepted and did what the fly told him.

It took weeks.

The problem seemed to stem from the inferior nature of the gray stuff that sat like half cooked bread dough in Albie's brain pan. A skilled electrician would have finished the job in two days. A typical layman with no prior electrical knowledge might have taken six at the outside.

Albie took weeks.

When the fly told him to get a condenser, Albie had no idea of what a condenser looked like. Then the fly had to spell out a description, which took time, or fly to the specific part and land on it. This posed a problem because of the vast amount of puzzle pieces in the apartment. Often Albie would lose the fly in the electrical labyrinth, and it would come buzzing out of some pile to pick him up again.

The results of the welding and soldering were abominable, not only for the device but also for Albie's hands, which very quickly became a red mass of burn marks. Asbestos gloves proved necessary, but what was gained in protection was lost in dexterity.

The first few days Albie called in sick at the floor covering store where he worked in the warehouse. The fourth day, however, the owner asked him what exactly was wrong with him.

"Uh, they don't know exactly." Albie raised his eyebrows as the fly started hopping on the Ouija board. "Just a sec . . ."

— *SOMETHING FATAL.*

Albie slammed his meaty hand over the mouthpiece. "Hey, I need my job!"

— *I AM ENOUGH FOR ALL YOUR NEEDS.*

Albie looked panickid.

— *PUT YOUR TRUST IN ME. HAVE FAITH.*

Albie took his hand away. "Cancer," he barked into the phone. "I got cancer . . . Yeah, I'm sure . . . Anytime, I guess . . . I gotta go now . . . That's okay. Bye." He hung up and looked with a hangdog expression at the fly. "Aw jeez . . ." The fly started to hop.

— *BACK TO WORK. GET A THREE INCH PIECE OF COPPER . . .*

"Copper . . . is that the silver stuff?"

But one day the machine was finally completed. It sat there in the living room like a whiskey still insanely crossbred with an espresso machine. Two huge metallic cones stood upward from the mass of metal, wires, glass, and Bakelite. They made Albie think of the girls with the big, metal-brassiered bazooms in the old science-fiction magazines.

He smiled, both at the image and in pride at his accomplishment. It was bizarre, it was erratic, it was downright sloppy, but it was the only thing he could ever remember building all by himself, except for some popsicle-stick baskets in the fourth grade.

"It's beautiful," he sighed, slopping onto the only empty chair that remained in the gadget-crowded room. "It's really beautiful." He turned to the fly. "When do we turn it on?"

— *AT DAWN. TOMORROW THE SUN WILL RISE ON A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH, ALBIE. AND YOU SHALL SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND.*

Albie smiled and sighed again. Then his stomach rumbled, and he realized how hungry he was. He walked to the refrigerator, but it was empty.

"Hey, look," he said to the fly, "I'm really hungry, but I've spent every penny on this thingamajig of yours. Could you like produce some food? Like a miracle, you know?"

The fly started hopping.

— *REMAIN WITH ME THIS NIGHT WITHOUT BODYLY SUSTENANCE. LET US FAST TOGETHER AND WAIT FOR THE MORN OF GLORY WHEN YOU SHALL BE FILLED WITH FAR MORE THAN FOOD.*

"Oh, all right," said Albie grumpily as he started to fast. Sometime after midnight he fell asleep and was able to forget the dull ache in his gut.

He came out of the dreamless sleep with a start. The fly, to awaken him, had crawled inside his nose. Albie snorted and gasped, but soon came to himself enough to see the fly doing graceful turns and parabolas in the humid, sticky air of his apartment.

"Is it time?" He rubbed his eyes sleepily.

— *THE HOUR IS AT HAND. OPEN THE WINDOW.*

Albie did. The eastern sky was dimly glowing with a diffused pink light. Not having seen a sunrise in years, Albie was duly impressed.

— *WHEN THE SUN RISES OVER THE HILLS, THROW THE SWITCH.*

The fly rose and began to buzz toward the open window.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Albie yelled. The fly settled once more on the board.

— *I GO TO MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY.*

And then he flew off, Albie hoped, to make straight the way.

Albie sat and waited for the sun, scared and nervous. He thought about forgetting the whole thing, but finally decided that since he had come this far, he might as well do it. He was neither talented nor bright, but he was tenacious. And gullible.

As the sun peered over the hills, Albie took a deep breath and threw the switch, as the fly had ordered. Instantly there was a hiss which became a buzz that grew to a throbbing that developed into a monstrous roar that filled the little room with the sound of a dozen dams breaking at once.

Albie went deaf.

Then between the two huge cones a light started to

glow, getting brighter and brighter until the ribbon of incandescence flared like the combined glow of a thousand acetylene torches.

Albie went blind.

Suddenly the machine's noises softened, its light dimmed, and was replaced by a dull red glow that grew outward on all sides, an ever expanding circle that in a few seconds held Albie inside its perimeter.

Albie died.

The circle kept growing, passing through the walls of Albie's apartment, through the streets of Albie's town, out into the countryside, picking up speed at a tremendous rate, leaving death behind as it passed.

Chicago was the first major city that it hit, only two minutes after it had begun.

Everyone in Chicago died.

Outward it grew, ten miles a second, then twenty, then thirty. It was as if a giant pen point had been touched to a giant paper towel, and all the ink had come out at once. Over the United States, up over the arctic, down to South America, out across the oceans

to Europe, to Asia, to cover the whole world with a crimson glow.

That evening, if anyone had been alive to see it, the moon would have appeared as a celestial clot of blood.

At dawn the next day, the fly arrived at the top of the world's highest mountain.

There it alighted on the shoulder of its master, and changed into its true form, that of a small, batwinged demon.

"You've done well," said the demon's master. "And all of his own free will. That was the tricky part."

The demon bowed his head humbly, happy to have served, and his master smiled at the unspoken obedience.

"And now that the battlefield is cleared of vermin, we shall begin. The gauntlet is thrown. The pets are dead."

And Satan, the lord of the flies, gathered his host and looked for one last time upon the world below before he advanced to meet the Foe, the trumpets of Armageddon blaring in his ears. Ω

## THE MASHGEAKH REJECTS THE DRAGON-SLAYER

They're not kosher, these wonder-beasts.  
All those wizard recipes calling for dragon's blood —  
Now, a dragon's blood is a dragon's life,  
And life's blood's not kosher.  
Dragons are out.  
Anyhow, reptiles, even fire-breathing,  
Are unclean.

The eagle's an unclean bird, and the lion's got no hoofs.  
Griffins are out.  
Horses have hoofs, but not cloven.  
No hippogriffs.

Leviathan's a Biblical beast,  
And officially to be, one day, the feast of the righteous,  
So it's got to be kosher,  
But the general opinion that it's some kind of wonder-whale  
Has the ultra-frum worried.  
They'll want to see scales before they dive in.

A unicorn, though —  
Listen, you bring me some proof that it chews a proper cud  
And isn't just some thin white funnyfaced pig  
Been prettied up with a golden horn  
To go with those dainty cloven hoofs,  
There'll be a gourmet market  
You wouldn't believe.

— Ruth Berman

# THE CLASSIC HORRORS



For an instant an unpleasant picture formed in his mind--that of an inky, humped créature crouched behind the parapet, waiting.....

"SMOKE GHOST" by FRITZ LEIBER

# A WITCH IN THE BALKANS

by Lord Dunsany

illustrated by Keith Minnion

It was a Christmas Eve at a country house, in which the house-party were gathered in arm-chairs before a fireplace that had never been modernized, and which still had room for big logs, which were now quietly burning. Ghost stories had been told, while one of the guests, one named Frederick Parnet, who in his time had wandered about the world a good deal, sat silent. As a tale ended, his hostess turned to him and said, "Won't you tell us a ghost story now, Mr. Parnet?"

"I have never seen a ghost," said Parnet.

"It needn't be a true one," said his hostess.

"I shouldn't tell it if it were not," said he.

"Don't you know any tale of banshees, goblins, or witches?" she asked.

"Oh, witches," he said. "That is a different matter."

"Then tell us a tale of a witch," she entreated.

"Well," he said, "in the Balkans they all believe in witches. At any rate in the parts of the Balkans I know. And it's very hard on the people they think are witches. They don't give them a chance."

"What country are you speaking of," he was asked.

"I was among the Vlachs," said Parnet. "They don't quite belong to any particular country in the way that we do. They come south out of Macedonia to the hills of Greece in the winter, and when it gets warm they go back to their mountains in Macedonia and Bulgaria. They bring their flocks with them and build reed-huts and go north again when the violets are over."

"There was an old woman who lived in a cottage near their huts, and they said she was working witchcraft against them. She had frightened their children somehow, and they had run with some story to their parents, and they had got as frightened as the children and wanted to kill the witch.

"That is how things were when I happened to come along and, seeing a crowd and hearing a noise, I asked what was the matter. And the Vlachs told me that the old woman was a witch and that they were going to kill her.

"Well, I was young and had no experience with such things, and I told them that it was all nonsense. I told them I was English and didn't mind witchcraft, and that I would go into her cottage and she could practice her witchcraft on me, and then she wouldn't want to be bothered with them and they would be all right.

"Their children gazed at me all the time with big round eyes, and their elders talked with each other for a little while; and then they said, if I would do that,

they would leave the witch alone. And so I saved her life.

"Well, I walked into her cottage then and found her seated in front of her fire, and I said, 'Look here, those silly devils think you're a witch. But I told them that is all nonsense.'

"And she looked at me and did not say thank you.

"'All nonsense,' I said again.

"'I make spells,' she said then.

"'Yes, I know,' I said. 'All nonsense.'

"'I make them out of this book,' she said. There was a great book beside her bound in black leather.

"'Well, you can make them at me if you like,' I said.

"And then she opened the book. I really don't think she understood what was going on. She had heard the Vlachs shouting all round her cottage, and probably thought I was in with them. My Greek wasn't her kind, and she can't have understood me very well. Anyway, she opened her book and began to read aloud out of it.

"'Look here,' I said. 'I'm English. You needn't read at me. Spells don't impress me. I'm not a Vlach.'

"And she smiled a very curious smile, and as I looked at her the spell worked. I never dreamt it was possible. She made me into a cat.

"It was so utterly astonishing, I did not know what to do. And gradually the instincts of a cat went surging through me, and I walked to the fire and lay down. It was a fine big fireplace, as big as this one, and I lay looking into the fire and began to think. And the more I thought, the more awful my predicament seemed to be. I couldn't speak, I couldn't explain, and the Vlachs had gone away. They couldn't have helped me even if they had stayed. There I was in the old woman's cottage, and she evidently thought I was in with the Vlachs. I thought and thought, and the only thing I could think of was that I had better be good cat.

"But even that didn't promise any chance of escape, since the better the cat I was, the more she would want to keep me. It was an awful predicament. She gave me one look, as much as to say, 'That is what comes of meddling with witches,' and then went on with her work, which seemed to be chiefly muttering into the fire, whether spells or old memories I can't say. I was never in a situation I liked less. Never."

"And do you mean that you were actually a cat?" said our hostess.

"I was actually a cat," said Parnet. "There was no doubt about it. A black cat covered with fur. And I was

gazing into the fire. That would have been pleasant if I could have thought of any way of escaping, but not doing it for the rest of my life, I had other things to do. But for the moment it was pleasant. You have no idea how pleasant. It seemed to supply all that we get from a whisky and soda, and a good book to read, and a comfortable chair. However, I didn't want to go on doing it all my life; and I could see no way of avoiding it.

"The witch sat there perfectly content. She wasn't going to do any more. I heard the Vlachs call to their children a long way off. They weren't going to do any more either. What on earth was I to do? After a while she gave me a saucer of milk, which I accepted gratefully. The milk tasted extremely good. Better, in fact, than anything I had ever tasted before. I don't like milk as a rule. But I did then. The windows of the room began to grow blue and dim.

"Then it got quite dark, and not till then did the old woman light a candle. Time went by more pleasantly than when it does here, in spite of my awful predicament; it went by more cosily and without impatience, and somehow there seemed more in the fire than there is in our newspapers and our talk, and all the things with which we concern ourselves. It seemed to have more interest in it and to be more full of change.

"It's difficult quite to explain, especially as none of you have studied it as I had to do. I had nothing else to occupy me for weeks, except plans for escape; and none of them turned out to be any good.

"Soon after the old witch lit the candle she picked it up, and without a word to me went out of her kitchen and into her other room, and I heard the creak of her bed as she lay down for the night. I was up on the table, where lay her old black book, in a moment. I realised that was the key, but could I turn it? I opened it with a paw, and it was all full of black spells. But they were in Chinese. That was no use to me. So I closed the book and went back to the fire and looked into its red and golden and orange depths; a very pleasant occupation, if you had nothing more serious to worry about."

"I shouldn't have thought . . ." began one of us.

"No," said Parnet, "nor would I. It wasn't until this unfortunate thing occurred to me that I realised how much interest there can be in the glow of a fire. I can't get it now. But at the time it supplied nearly everything. Everything except what I wanted most, a plan of escape. I had no hope from the Vlachs. What they ought to have done was to go in and rescue me, and when they saw what had happened, demanded my release. But they were evidently content with things as they were. The witch was working her witchcraft on me, and that suited them, and they felt their children were safe.

"Soon they would go back to their mountains, for the great carpets of violets that grew in those lands were nearly over. Then I should be all alone with the witch, and no one would know what had happened to me, for the Vlachs wouldn't bother to tell anyone.

What was to be done? I pondered for some time. And then I turned to watch the glow of the witch's fire and the little flames that jumped up every now and then, and the grey ash that covered more and more of the glow. And watching the embers I must have fallen asleep. And the morning came, and I was still a cat. First the dim light came into the room through the windows. And then came the witch. She took no notice of me at first, but boiled an egg in a great pot over her fire. Then she went to the cupboard and took out a piece of meat and threw it down beside me.

"I looked at her gratefully and purred, which was all I could do. It was no use resenting her offhand way, as my only chance seemed to be that she might disenchanted me, though it didn't seem very likely. As soon as I began to eat the meat, another black cat walked in from the other room and came up and looked at me. I looked back at it, and it lay down and went on looking with pale-yellow eyes with dark slits down the centre. I suppose my eyes looked the same. I wondered what it would do.

"Then it shut its eyes, and opened them no more for an hour. I never knew whether it had been a cat always, or whether it had been enchanted like myself. I thought for a long while of how to communicate with it, in the hope of planning some sort of escape; but then I gave it up, because I didn't trust that black cat. It did not do anything that I could complain of; I only went by its looks, which is often a good thing to go by.

"Somehow I felt I would sooner have trusted the witch. There was no sound now from the Vlachs, and I fancied they must have gone. I was quite alone with this witch and her other cat. That black book on her table was the only hope that I had. But what good I could get out of it I did not know. I could tell you a great deal of those days in the witch's cottage, if I thought that you would be interested; but I spent so much of the time looking into the fire, and in spite of its mystery and wonderful beauty, I am afraid that that is a thing to which you would scarcely care to listen to me, were I to describe to you all those caves of colour and golden valleys and mountains that I saw for many weeks in that witch's fire. Yes, I was there for weeks.

"And all that time the old witch never allowed her fire to go out. She used to drag in large logs and throw them down on her fire and then sit in front of it muttering; spells or old memories, I never knew what she muttered. Sometimes she boiled meat in her cauldron, sometimes tea, and that was about all the housekeeping that she did. Where she got her meat or her tea I never found out. Easily enough, I should say, considering what she could do. All day I sat and looked at the fire, and the other cat did the same. It was a lovely thing to look at.

"As the evening came on and the light of the witch's window grew less and less, the dark part of the eyes of the other cat grew rounder and rounder, and I suppose mine did too. Then we were each of us given a saucer of milk, and the old witch went to bed. Many days

passed like that, and then one day it struck me that, pleasant although it was to look in the fire, I should think of no plan of escape if I did that, but would just grow like the other cat and stay all my life, as he appeared to be going to do, whatever he may have been before.

"Perhaps he had been a cat all his life, but never by the slightest hint did he let me see whether he had been or not. And the spring was coming on well, which is like summer here, so I lay outside the door in the sun. The old witch didn't mind. There was a path that went by close to the door, and sometimes as many as ten people would go by in a day. Sometimes nobody went by at all. I watched them all, even though I knew that none of them could help me. And I thought. But I could never think of a plan that would disenchant me.

"One thing I knew at once: and that was who was friendly and who was hostile. All cats know that. But it was no use going away with a friendly old woman. She couldn't disenchant me. The other cat knew that I was up to some game, though that was more than I knew myself, for the problem beat me. What depressed me more than anything was that that black tom-cat did nothing to interfere with me, but merely sat there with a supercilious look that seemed to show it was hopeless.

"People of every race in the Balkans went by in a fortnight, as well as some that looked like Arabs, and all kinds of Turks, not only Balkan Turks but some that looked almost Mongol. I watched them all going by, and the other black cat looked at me every now and then with the look that seemed to show I was doing no good, and never would do any, either. And then one day a Chinaman came by. I wasn't surprised: I had seen so many different kinds of men and women go by as I lay there in the sun. The old witch had gone away to milk her cow, and the other black cat had followed her, and I was quite alone.

"And all of a sudden I remembered the old black book. I ran up to the Chinaman. He would be able to read the book whose spells were all in Chinese. You know how appealing a cat can be. I was all appeal. I had to be. I knew this was my only chance. I rubbed against his legs; I stretched out a paw; I miaowed; I did everything I had ever seen a cat do to attract attention; and when I had got it, I ran a little way and looked round till at last he followed, and I led him right into the old witch's kitchen. If I could get him to read from that book, he might hit on the right spell.

"It was pure chance, but the only chance. I jumped upon the table and opened the book with my paw. He was a very intelligent Chinaman. He saw at once that I wasn't an ordinary cat. I think a European would have been surprised, but he was evidently not that. That saved a lot of time. I pointed to the book and looked up. Then I put my paw to my ear, the ear that was turned towards him, and sat in a listening attitude.

"The Chinaman understood at once, and began to



read aloud. Queer things happened in the room as he read, for — of course — the spells that he read were chosen purely at random. A pair of tongs, for instance, got up and walked out of the room. That, too, would have surprised a European; but the Chinaman read on. Then for a long time came nothing but little spells: flies, for instance, fell dead; and mice ran out of the room backwards; and dust got up in little eddies and whirled away out of the door like dust-devils in Africa.

"It was evident that it was by spells that the old woman did most of her housekeeping, though I had not seen her using them. These little spells soothed me, for I had been rather afraid of some big spell, and did not know what might come into the room, though I comforted myself with the thought that a cat can generally look after itself, whatever comes. I looked up to the low rafters, and saw that I could easily get up there and hide between them and the thatch.

"But nothing bad came. Still nothing useful appeared among the spells, and I remained a cat. I watched the Chinaman continually, fearing that he might grow tired of reading. But he seemed to understand, and read on. Of course, I did not know a word of his language, but I could tell what he was reading by what happened. There were, for instance, several cockroaches running about the floor; and, as the Chinaman read one of the spells, they all fell dead at once; and another spell swept them out the door like a broom.

"Then the other cat walked into the room. It seemed to know what was going on and looked unpleasantly at the Chinaman and at me; but then, it always looked unpleasant. For a moment I thought it would attack the Chinaman, but then it lost interest and sat down and looked at the fire. The Chinaman read on. I feared now that the witch might return.

"Her cat was never very far away from her. If she came in, she would snatch her book and drive the Chinaman out, either with her old broomstick or with some spell; and my only chance would be gone. Still she did not come. A small imp ran into the doorway, called from a wood by one of the spells, and looked inquiringly at us and saw that he was not wanted and ran away. An owl flew by and swept two or three times round the

room on his great white wings, and hooted something that witches would have understood, and sailed out again.

"Then a great number of bats appeared, and they fluttered away too, when they found that they were not wanted. And I saw a great many lizards. Of course I never knew what was coming next. And all of a sudden the Chinaman, who had just turned a page, stopped reading straight on, and seemed to pick out a spell, and looked at me with what almost seemed like a smile, but you couldn't tell. And then he read it. It was the right spell, a spell to turn cats back into men.

"When I say back, I do not know if it only turned back cats that had once been men, or whether it would turn any cat into a man. I felt a very odd change at once and the room swam in a mist, and when it cleared the first thing that I saw was that other cat getting up from the fire and hurrying out of the room, no longer a cat, but a man, the kind of man I don't greatly like, a sharp, slick sort of fellow; but not sharp enough for the witch, for he had not escaped being turned into a cat, unless, of course, he had been a cat all the time. Anyway, I was glad to see the last of him. And the next thing I noticed was that I was a man again.

"Well, I thanked the Chinaman in English, and such Greek as I knew. But he didn't know any English and could make nothing of my Greek, and I tried a little French with the same result. But he understood I was grateful. Then he smiled and he went away. What he was doing in the Balkans I never found out, and I never saw him again.

"Then I thought the best thing to do was to follow the example of the other cat and clear out as fast as I could before the witch should return. So I cleared out. And I was only just in time, for I got a glimpse of her coming back with a pail of milk; but, fortunately, she did not see me. It was a lovely summer's day, and the Vlachs were all gone with their straw huts from that part of the country, and I thought I had better go, too."

I wondered what our hostess and the rest of the party would say of that story. So I said nothing, and listened. But the story had been long, and it was late in front of that lovely hot fireplace, and all but I and the man who told that strange tale were asleep. Ω

## THE RESURRECTIONIST AT BOARDING SCHOOL

My roommate, young Burke, I'm afraid,  
pursued an unsavory trade,  
which caused him some strain  
to entirely explain  
why he slipped out each night with a spade.

— Darrell Schweitzer

# DEAR DADDY

by Kiel Stuart

illustrated by Rodger Gerberding

It lay between the stark beauty of Big Bend National Park and Alpine, Texas, along Highway 170.

It was as if The Frontier Palace Megamall had magically appeared atop scrubby caliche ground, reminding Rory MacLaren of those crystal-growing sets a baby has for Christmas. As big as 100 football fields, the mall was crammed with facilities: over 800 stores, an arena, zoos, beaches, fortune-tellers, doctors, lawyers, Indian Chiefs.

*And now, wrestlers, Rory thought.*

*Dear Daddy: Greetings from the other side of the world. You'll never guess where I am now. And we're going to be the headliners: The Ripper and The Savannah Beach Boy.*

From the instant he and Trent Hoffstead nosed into the mall's vast parking lot, Rory sensed a unique symmetry: this fortress of solitude, governed by its own rules, springing from the flatlands. Alone. But complete.

*Well, a job's a job, he thought, whether you're working for some slimy little promoter in upstate New York or a crazy, bigbucks Texas businessman. Just one more gig in the endless series of his gypsy life.*

Trent guided the Chevy Suburban into a parking space, and Rory took in the mall's white-stucco façade, the people flowing in and out of its entrances. "Look at this place. In the middle of nowhere! How can it survive?"

Trent shut the motor off. "Hell, this is the wave of the future. You don't need anything else with a mall like this. It's got gyms, hotels, a post office, medical facilities, even a newspaper. At least that's what the promoter told me on the phone."

They climbed down from the car into hard dry heat, the sky an aching turquoise.

Could something this new, this good, withstand him? Rory hesitated to step forward.

"What?" said Trent.

"Nothing," he murmured, and set his legs into motion. He had to be somewhere. Might as well be here.

Inside, Trent leaned against a pillar, gazing at a map to figure out where the promoter's office was. Rory sat on a nearby bench. Its icy touch seeped into his legs. He gripped the stone rim tight enough to cramp his hands.

*Dear Daddy: I see this scene. It's in one of those gin dives we used to go to, when I was a kid. There's this red-haired torcher, and she's singing an old song, "My Heart Belongs To Daddy."*

*Now why would she do a thing like that?*

There was no sense of time or season in the modern feudal state of The Palace — only a glittering, endless array of modern fancies. Things you never knew existed, but could not live without.

Posters and signs grew like leaves, hawking every sort of information from sales to soap opera star appearances through one or two signs about the wrestling-to-come. See it here, see it now, the grudge match of the century.

Rory thought this a particularly appropriate place to have "rassles": In its own way the mall was as phony, and as real. Maybe this yahoo promoter wasn't nuts after all.

Walking through the mall, Rory sensed air held at a constant temperature, devoid of any scents pleasant or unpleasant, any sense of humidity or dryness, anything at all except a faint throb of jangled shopping nerves. They might have been underground, in some post-nuke Brave New World. Only he was the bomb.

Were people staring at him? Did they know?

Skin shrank. Defensive shell grew. He put his head down.

They reached the office and signed their contracts. Handshaking all around. As quickly as it had begun, it was over and they were spat back into the mall.

By the time they got to the hotel Rory could feel the cumulative effects of how he'd spent the last few years. The long drive there hadn't helped either. His tongue dragged a bit.

So he gaped at the hotel lobby, to cover his shortness of breath. It looked either like the ceiling of Madison Square Garden, or the latest Steven Spielberg spaceship, he couldn't decide which.

Trent said, "I'll park the car. Don't forget you owe half on the room."

"Don't you trust me for it? Besides, where the Hell am I going to run to?" Rory scratched his name on the register.

"Take a look around. There are a million places to hide."

*Dear Daddy: Hear that?*

Upstairs, Rory slid the key into the lock and clicked it open. He took a step inside, and held his breath.

A dungeon. How appropriate for him.

The room was decorated in varying shades of gray and black, with macramé spiderwebs, fake iron bars, and shackles on the imitation stone walls. It shared a timeline with modern, gleaming bath fixtures and refrigerator.

He let his breath out. Two black four-poster beds were divided by what seemed to be a huge floor-to-ceiling window. He went to it, touching its gray burlap curtain aside.

It wasn't a real window. It was some kind of light fixture. The light emanated from a glassed-in fake moon soaring high in a phthaloc-blue sky, too much detail for a real moon to have. It was painted so there appeared to be a forest down below, with another castle far in the distance.

It wasn't real, but it was something to look at. He leaned on the "parapet" and gazed at the moon.

*Dear Daddy: Something about this place almost smacks of home. Clarendon, New York. The beautiful Catskills, just minutes away from major metropolitan areas. I'm glad you aren't here to share this. But then that's me all over.*

"Jesus! Where are the lava lamps?"

He turned to see Trent framed in the doorway, bags dripping from both hands. "Don't get up on my account," he grumbled.

Of course not. Why would he? That would show courtesy. That would make him human. The room was suddenly very quiet.

Trent looked down at his hands. He shifted, clearly uncomfortable. "Well," he said at last. "What have you been up to?"

*Why ask? Rory thought. The usual. Getting loaded, going to jail, beating up innocent folk.* "Oh, hardly anything." And then, because Trent was the closest thing to a friend as he'd ever had, added, "What about you?"

Trent blinked at the ceiling. "Well, now that you mention it . . . I seem to have landed this very lucrative gig in a big old mall."

Rory tried to think of something to say.

At last, Trent moved. "Well, I gotta shave. Wonder if they have little elf-shaped soaps in that bathroom there."

Rory rolled over. He couldn't breathe. Something was sitting on his chest and it wasn't going to move.

Much to his surprise, he closed his eyes, and went out between one breath and the next.

That night he wakened.

Why? What had awakened him this time?

He felt wet. Wet and hot and sticky. He touched the sheets. They felt as if they were covered in warm jelly. He reached over and batted the light on.

In the soft yellowish lamplight his eyes focused on sheets pooled with blood.

He opened his mouth, but it was the slow creaking of a machine, long rusted dead. His throat closed down, the individual cells swelling and growing together. No sound emerged.

He looked down again. The blood didn't want to let him go, clung to him with a hundred tiny clutching arms. He peeled away from those red grasping hands, staggered to a mirror.

Standing behind him was his father. *Did I kill someone this time?* Rory asked, soundless.

Daddy shook his head. In his eyes a pool of infinite sadness shimmered. "Poor little sinner," he said, then was gone.

Rory looked down at his chest. Normal, no wounds. But the pain lingered. As he listened hard for signs of Trent awakening, he rubbed nervous fingers through the chest hair. Nothing. Just a dreaming manifestation of his own rotten insides. The blood of lambs. Slaughtered lambs.

*Dear Daddy: It's showtime. I'm changing.*

He heard the ring announcer. "In our main event, a special heavyweight grudge bout! Making his way to the ring now . . ."

Trent gave him a little push. He took a step into the aisle.

" . . . from the fabulous state of New York, weighing in at 240 pounds . . . The Ripper!"

The crowd heat built. He tensed his arms and shoulders, set his face in a sneer, and felt the Ripper persona slide easily into him.

He swaggered down the aisle, pausing to hurl a wolf's snarl at some of the front-row marks. They returned the favor. He stopped, a hand on the ring ropes, ready to climb in, and swiveled his head around.

The crowd shifted toward him, a low murmur underneath the louder roars. They knew him. Knew his perverted nature, were already responding to it. He ducked inside the ring, prowling its perimeter, ignoring the announcer and referee, raking his gaze from head to head in the stands. He picked out the promoter, up and away near the nosebleed seats, the king checking his subjects.

" . . . and his opponent . . . weighing in at 251 pounds, The Savannah Beach Boy —"

A ripple of delight fluttered through the crowd even before the announcer could get out the full name.

" — Trent Hoffstead!"

Pandemonium. Trent burst from the wings, racing straight for The Ripper. The Ripper felt his lip curl.

Trent charged, vaulting into the ring, looking every inch the worldclass athlete. Women and children, teens, even grown men stood to cheer him on.

*Dear Daddy: What's it like to be the hero? How does fighting evil feel?*

Trent skipped backwards, as lightly as a bullfighter evading his vicious nemesis.

The Ripper clenched his teeth, and lowered his head. *Damn you, he thought. Who died and made you Pope?*

He leaped for Trent, locking up, then taking him over in a hip toss.

"Pretty good," Trent whispered, remembering to keep it down.

*Good? How dare he?* The Ripper fed on rage, used it, forcing the reaction from his own tired frame, sizzling the crowds and astonishing himself with his own intensity.

Trent took his momentum and flew with it, springing off the ropes like a rocket made of flesh, soaring over and under him, the screams of the crowd echoing around The Ripper's head until Trent put him in the finish hold, and he sneaked out his "illegal weapon."

Of course, the ref didn't see it, but the crowds did. The Ripper made his gesture, whistling the loaded fist for Trent's temple, stopping, just barely stopping, short of actual contact.

Trent went down with a crash. The Ripper covered him, and the ref counted to three. Instantly the crowd leapt up, shouting protests.

The Ripper slammed his triumphant arms skyward, and fled for the locker room, leaving the groggy Trent to be "wakened" by the ref, find out about the finish, and boil the crowd to a frenzy.

The Ripper sailed straight past a startled tag team, straight into one of the toilets, and crashed his fist against its steel wall.

Rory woke before dawn and could not get back to sleep.

As quietly and quickly as possible, he dressed and crept out the door. In minutes he was at mall level ready to run.

At this hour, it was a softly deserted ghost town. Down one end of the long arm which housed the hotel, Rory could see only the clean-up crew at work. He stretched out, paying close attention to his tight hamstrings, and started off at a lop, toward the New Age addition.

It was the second mile and he was just beginning to warm up. His breathing was steady, even, strong. He felt light, free.

He ran down the corridor past the clothing stores and candy shops and record stores, now closed.

He smiled. This wasn't a bad place for an early jog. No traffic, no smog, no hot sun or biting insects or barking dogs.

Picking up the pace a little, he neared the area still under construction and nosed down its half-built corridor. Fewer obstacles to run around, since the mall architects hadn't yet carted in those everpresent palm trees and fountains. His legs were warm and fluid in their motion. The Brave New Construction site made it easier, almost like running a track.

*Dear Daddy: They noticed me last night. How could they not? You always notice the one who's different.*

Now even the cleaning crew was out of sight. The ghost town closed its arms around him. *I think we're alone now, he sang to himself. There doesn't seem to be anyone around.*

Instantly, he sensed that was a lie.

A sound followed him. He swallowed, picked up his stride again. Echoes of his own footsteps, or another runner, pacing him from behind? Maybe it was Trent, playing with him. Maybe it was another wrestler who also ran. He glanced over his shoulder. All he saw was a long dark tunnel. Not another human soul.



Human . . . He lengthened his stride, blowing rhythmically in and out, pumping his arms to speed along. The footsteps slapped loud and close. Their cadence was different from his own. He set his jaw and dodged, but the noise dodged with him.

It was then that he felt hot breath whistling in his ear, steely fingers plucking at his clothes. He stretched his stride further, body slanting low, arms flying. Something that felt like a hand dealt him a blow.

Who was it? An angry mob, torches aloft, closing in on him at last? He felt another blow, twisted his head to look over his shoulder again, running blind.

He ran smack into a wall.

And something swarmed all over him. Rory went down hard, tumbling sideways, scrambling to avoid the hands that now tore at his clothes. He tried to gain his feet. The hands smacked him down. He tried to roll away. They dragged him up, then slammed him against the wall. He heard breathing, grunting, from the unseen thing.

There was nothing to fight, but he fought, bared his teeth, flailed silently. The hands punched him in the solar plexus, doubling him up. They yanked him by the hair, forcing him straight. They poked, clawed, tore, stripping his body with pain.

He stumbled along the wall, trying to grab for one of the unseen hands. A step here, another. The grunts rhythmic now punctuated by low garbled noises, like a voice bubbling up through the mud.

**Splat!** — he felt something, bigger, harder than a hand, whip him, and the eye-gouging pain of a broken cheekbone burst across his face. Three of his teeth went flying. He reached a corner. The juncture pressed against his back, holding him as neatly as a trap.

Nowhere else to go.

An invisible two-by-four whistled through the air toward his head. He jerked his body backward, clawed at the wall behind him, flung his hands out to seek escape, any escape.

The sound of breaking glass.

The shards were a thousand razor blades digging into his left hand and arm, shredding it to strips of bloody meat. The villagers had their monster cornered.

He tried to pull away. His body ignored the directive. The floor began to sway. He felt his eyes closing, shuddered once, slumped sideways, and hit the floor.

The noise of a vacuum cleaner made him open his eyes.

He was lying in a corner of the partially-constructed corridor. Breath hissed out of him. He scrambled to his feet. At one end of the corridor, the cleanup crew polished the mall floor.

He grabbed for his face. No pain, nothing broken.

He turned to an empty store window for his reflection. No blood, no bruises. His tongue slid along his teeth, searching for damage. No. He had all the teeth he came in there with. He let out a thin breath, slid to the floor, like a sleepy child, and sat there, head in

hands. *They almost got me, he thought. But I was one step ahead of them. Evil is clever.*

By the time the cleanup crew drew near him, Rory had recovered enough to get up and slump along toward the hotel, ignoring the curious stares of the mall workers.

*Dear Daddy: Here we go again. Time to feed the crowds. But don't look at me. Not tonight.*

Rory leaned his back against the locker room's cold hard tiles and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine his mind a large windshield, the wiper arm busily washing it clean with each stroke.

By the time they announced *The Savannah Beach Boy* versus *The Ripper*, he was ready.

And so was the crowd. They wanted revenge against him, wanted it so bad they could taste it, judging from the screams.

The Ripper swaggered down the aisle, engaged in some fan-baiting, when Trent charged him from behind and he tumbled forward.

A roar of approval. They liked that. They were one with Trent. Their righteousness his.

The Ripper felt a faint stirring, an angry churning in his gut. *Oh, yeah? Well fuck you too.*

Trent rolled him into a pin and the little ref counted two.

The Ripper kicked out, jumping to his feet. He backed up, showing fear and anger. *Coward that you are, he taunted himself.*

His opponent took advantage of his hesitation, locking up with him. Trent's belly pressed against his, corded arms snaking around his waist.

The crowd applauded. From Trent's bulging muscles, it appeared that The Ripper would be squeezed in two. But Trent had a touch as light and soft as a baby's, and it felt like a dance embrace.

The Ripper caught a joyful gleam in Trent's eyes; he loved this, the fast hard work, the split-second timing of aerial and mat moves, and he was working right up to his potential.

Trent tapped him to signal their next move, popped him up and over in a belly-to-belly suplex. The Ripper landed, twisting, and arched away from a certain pinfall into a bridge as the ref counted to two. Trent grasped him tighter, reversed the bridge. Another two-count. The crowd was on their feet and screaming.

So they locked up again. The Ripper closed his eyes, turning his head away.

The crowd had no faces. The crowd was a mist, swirling around his throat and into his lungs, choking the badness from him.

His eyes flew open to see Trent and the angry-faced crowd. He jerked free, caught Trent in a single-leg takedown and they went a hard twenty minutes to broadway.

Tumbling down the aisle after Trent, The Ripper split off on his own the minute they were out of the crowd's sight.

He took his time coming back down, in the locker room.

Their finish had worked like a charm; the crowd, many repeats among them, willingly suspending their disbelief, outraged at this latest turn of events. They wanted no double disqualification. They wanted Trent to thrash the Ripper, to beat his sniveling cowardly brains out.

*Dear Daddy: That's the way it goes, ain't it?*

Rory opened his eyes to find himself jogging through the mall, far away from the hotel, away from the construction site, down toward the wing that housed The Animal Farm, with its fake barns and real hay.

No one there. No one but him. He looked down at his black-clad legs, at the black running shoes, moving rhythmically and easily.

And then.

He took a step and the little zoo melted, smearing into a field under a bright Catskills sun. A real barn stood some distance off, and he was running toward it.

Home!

No — his fat little legs pumped hard. He looked over his shoulder. Didn't matter that the barn was all old and jumbly or the fields overgrown. He panted, running closer and closer to the barn.

But then.

Something stepped out of the barn, and came running to meet him. He looked around wildly.

Panic. A gleaming, a shimmer before his eyes. Scalp tightened. His guts melted to liquid. Hands reached for him. In another minute they would have him.

No . . . just another step more . . . He stumbled. Put out his hand to steady himself.

Touched the farm's wooden rail.

He was back in the mall. He shut his eyes in relief, sagged against the railing, breathing deeply.

"Welcome to the Gouge Palace," Daddy said.

His eyes shot open. His father stood to bar his way.

"Wait," said Daddy. "Wait, boy! Look over there."

Rory, teeth chattering, looked down, where Daddy's avenging finger pointed.

The floor was littered with bodies. "Your fans," Daddy said.

Rory turned soundlessly to run. But Daddy stepped out and blocked him, pointed sadly. Another body on the ground. "More of your handiwork?" Daddy asked.

It was a large body, a very large body, lying twisted away from him. Rory put out a shaking hand to touch it. It rolled toward him, blank-eyed and stiff.

*Trent.* He buckled, folded, and went out.

Trent woke him up in time for work. He didn't ask why Rory had slept all day, or why he now stared at Trent's living form. Rory didn't volunteer the information. Neither said much of anything on the way to the arena.

*Jesus, Rory thought, I'm tired, so tired.* He trudged

to the lockers, leaned against the cold metal as if the temperature would shock him to life.

*Dear Daddy: I'm back at work now. And how are things where you live?*

Wrestlers and groupies and go-fers were coming and going in a dizzying buzz, but Rory noticed almost none of it. He sat alone on a bench waiting for his persona to arrive.

The Ripper finally took hold. A go-fer came over to say that it was time. He could feel his lip curling already. He got up slow, moving to the runway as if stalking.

They announced him. He held back, hesitating, putting off the walk to the ring, like the reptilian belly-crawler that he was. He peered out from the head of the aisle. Trent was already inside the ring, strutting, walking tall. The crowd showed its approval of him.

Trent "noticed" him holding back. "What's the matter?" His throaty roar carried down the aisle. "Did your mommy say you couldn't come out and play with the big boys?"

The Ripper hesitated, cursing softly. Trent turned his back, playing the crowd.

The Ripper timed his move. Then he charged, bowling Trent over.

But Trent reversed it easily, and flung The Ripper across the ring. They whipped past one another, a sonic cruciform.

"Get him!" Screams from the crowd. "Get the bastard!"

They collided. He had his hands around Trent's thick neck, trying to choke the life out of him.

Trent knocked his hands away, slapped the Ripper flat on his back, then hauled him up again easily, taunting with his fists, polling the crowd for reactions.

Should he? Should he?

The crowd said he should. He pulled the rubber-legged Ripper around, giving everyone in the arena a great view. Helpless in Trent's iron grip, The Ripper staggered this way and that, as pliant as a puppet.

Trent wound up for the big blow, gave it to him good, and was on The Ripper in a flash as soon as he went down.

More screams, gut-level killing joy.

Trent pinned him clean.

*Damn you, he thought, damn you to the grave and back!*

The Ripper shook away after the count, and rolled onto the ring apron. He staggered outside the ring, grabbed a chair. While Trent still had his hand raised by the ref in victory, The Ripper leapt back inside and brought the chair whistling down on his head. Trent dropped like a sack of feed.

*Who's the puppet now?* thought The Ripper. Who?

He beat Trent up afterwards — very, very thoroughly, kicking him when down, using the chair, choking him with a loose tag rope. The crowd screamed for The Ripper's blood. It was music to his

ears. Let them scream, let them raise their torches against him. Try and stop me now, he thought.

He gave the prone Trent one final kick, then fled to the locker room and sealed himself off in one of the showers until the hot water had scalded The Ripper out of him.

Then he ducked out the back way. If he said so much as one word to anyone, he would never find the strength to make it to his room.

He was seven years old, in bed at night.

Moonlight splashed across his face, making him twist his head away and scrunch his eyes shut. It hurt.

His nose itched! He wanted to scratch it. He tried to raise a hand to scratch it, but it was no good.

His wrists were tied to the bedposts, and even if he could have managed to roll up his body to scratch with his feet, that wouldn't be any darn good either because his feet were tied too.

Daddy came in and stood there. He heard heavy breathing through the dark and closed his eyes, praying Daddy wouldn't come in.

But he did. He always did.

Without any words, Daddy hovered over him. Then he said, "Poor Rory, all alone. No one to touch him or hold him."

"It's okay, Daddy." His voice was tiny.

"Aren't you scared? Scared of the dark?"

It wasn't the dark that frightened him. "It's okay, Daddy," he repeated. "Really."

"Poor sweet Rory. I'll hold you."

Rory woke with a sharp hiss of breath.

*Where's Daddy?*

Out of bed, he staggered for the fake Castle window. He opened his mouth, breath shuddering back into his lungs. His hand went to his chest.

The dream took on acid clarity. Long-suppressed memory flooded back.

He closed his eyes against it. But the memory came anyway. Blood on the sheets: his small smooth hairless chest, the skin scraped away by vengeful scrubings with steel wool. That crowd-turned-mist: the near-drownings. The attack in the mall: the night Daddy had knocked three teeth out of his head. The blood of the lamb. The things Daddy had done, back on the farm.

The farm . . .

*(Rory sensed a unique symmetry: this fortress of solitude, governed by its own rules, springing from the flatlands. Alone. But complete.)*

Of course. Just like back home.

Quietly, he opened the curtains and stared out at the Castle's fake, shiny moon, feeling its unreal light pierce his eyes all the way back to his skull.

He tried to stand in silence, tried not to breathe or make a sound.

But he must have made enough noise to wake Trent. He heard Trent stir, then sleepily call over, "What's up? Why are you starin' at the moon?"

It was a long time before he answered. "Because I can," said Rory.

Trent grunted, then rolled over, and the sound of his steady breathing filled the room. Rory gazed at the phony moon. It was quiet and still.

In the lingering clarity of recall, he thought:

*So it wasn't me. It was him. I wasn't the one who took us to bars when I was six. I wasn't the one who sold me to men when I was eight. I wasn't the one who asked my father to come to my room when I was tied down and —*

*— And then he blew himself away the day I turned fourteen.*

He swallowed the lump in his throat. *They're not really staring at me, all those people.*

But a tiny sound snaked around his ears. Soft whispers danced in the room.

He tried to close his ears to it.

The sounds welled up. He shifted from one foot to another, put his hands over his ears, and still he heard it.

Thrumming in his ears now.

No.

He closed his eyes, cutting off the light from the artificial moon. A tear squeezed out and made its way down his face.

The words hovered close for another heartbeat. Finally took shape.

*"Daddy's here. Daddy will always be here."*

He tensed.

*Okay. I'm ready. No more running.*

He prepared for the wrestling match of his life.

And felt his father's large bony hand, laid on his shoulder.

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# A TALK WITH JOE LANSDALE

by Darrell Schweitzer

**Worlds of Fantasy & Horror:** In the introduction to *By Bizarre Hands*, Lewis Shiner goes to some length to define your place in the horror field. I have my own theory that you're the Warren Zevon of horror. I'm thinking of the song "Excitable Boy," which, if it had a Texas accent, would be a Joe Lansdale story. Where do you see yourself in the context of the field?

**Lansdale:** I don't give any thought to where I see myself. I just do what I do. Whatever interests me at the time, that's what I pursue. But I don't have much conscious attitude about it, other than I try to write about the people I know, the characters I know — which is not to say that all the people I know are bad people, but those are the ones that interest me.

**Woff&H:** Is it because there aren't enough plot conflicts in the lives of good people? What's the fascination with the bad ones?

**Lansdale:** I think we all know bad ones from afar. I think it's that they're so different. I think too that anytime you see something that's bad, you recognize something of yourself in it, whether you admit it or not. I think that the worst things that people do are in all of us — not that all of us do those things — and also the best things people do are in all of us. So I think it — the evil side — is an interesting side to explore, because it's a side that you don't think about too much. Publicly you have to pursue something else. So it's kind of nice, in fiction, to be a human monster for a while, or at least try and understand what makes 'em tick. It's just one of the mysteries of life that this kind of stuff exists. It doesn't mean that I want to be these people or that I'm impressed with them. But I'm amazed by them.

**Woff&H:** How much of your material is based on fact? Have you ever found yourself confronted by such people? A lot of your stories seem to be about secret, murder rituals in back-country towns.

**Lansdale:** Yeah. A lot of them are based on the truth. One story, "The Night They Missed the Horror Show," most of the things in that story either happened, or they were apocryphal stories that I'd heard when I was growing up, and I put them all together. They didn't all happen to those people in one night, but a friend of mine is actually the guy that dragged the dead dog around. He wasn't a bad guy like in the story. He was just drunk and a little stupid that night. But the events that happen to these characters supposedly did happen to some people and I just took them and consolidated them. The two guys who were the villains, Vinnie and Pork, I knew those guys. They weren't

called that. But they were real and they did things very similar to that. So, that's realistic, yeah.

I write about things which I generally think are despicable, but I often write about them straight-on to the point where people sometimes think I have sympathy for them, which always surprises me.

**Woff&H:** You always write about rural degenerates, which seems to give rural people a bad name.

**Lansdale:** I think about that sometimes, but I think what it is, is that I'm so drawn to the horrific, and to crime in general, that I'm not going to be writing about the good people. I'm not trying to say this is the way *all* the people I know are, or this is the way all the people are in East Texas, but these are the sort of people I'm writing about — at least now. If I lived in Maine or California or New York, I'd still write about those people. They may not drive the pickup trucks, but they're there. Stephen King has certainly written about rednecks in Maine. They're everywhere. I don't think ignorance is a Southern thing by any means. I think we Texans know ignorance when we see it though, and I am not sure that some others do.

**Woff&H:** For a long time, everyone seemed to assume that that sort of behavior was a Southern thing, but then I come from Philadelphia where we had Gary Heidnick's famous body shop.

**Lansdale:** I think it's just that the Southerners are fascinated by that. We have the term Southern Gothic because for some reason it has always been part of our culture to observe weirdness. We look at it straight on. I think Flannery O'Connor said, "We still know weird when we see it."

**Woff&H:** Some of your stories strike me as being like more straightforward Faulkner. I'm thinking of Faulkner stories like "The Hound," for example.

**Lansdale:** I like Faulkner. I tend to lean more toward the humorous grotesque stuff he did, stuff like "Mule in the Yard." I thought that was good. Or one that was very creepy, was "Barn Burning." To me, that's the way I tend to think of horror. I don't think so much of ghosts and rattlings in the attic. Stuff like that doesn't do much for me. I'm not saying that I haven't read stories like that that don't work for me, but as a writer, if I'm going to spend any time on something, it's hard for me to believe in something like that. I'm more interested in what people do to one another, because that scares me more. Therefore I'm able to make that more real, because those things happen. I don't mean that I feel *obliged* to write about that, or that I only write about that, but the older

I get and the more I write, the less interested I am in things that go "Boo!" in the night, unless it's somebody doing it.

**Woff&H:** You'd say, then, that you're not all that much interested in supernaturalism?

**Lansdale:** I am as a reader, but not so much as a writer, because I don't have the patience for it. As I reader, I have to be in the mood. I grew up on supernatural fiction, and I loved it, and I still love it in a certain compartment of my mind, but I don't read as much of it, and I certainly am not drawn to write it as much. Once in a while a story will occur to me. I have written some supernatural things, but it doesn't seem to be what I'm designed to do as a writer. I often like a lot of things as a reader that I'm not interested in writing.

**Woff&H:** How about using supernatural lore from Texas? Robert E. Howard made a couple of attempts, but otherwise I don't know that very much of it has ever been done. It's probably a very rich subject.

**Lansdale:** Most of the stuff that's been done has been non-fiction books, Texas ghost books, and such, most of them not too good. But, as a writer, that doesn't interest me too much. I won't box myself in and say I won't do that. If something interests me enough and excites me enough, I just might; but it seems that my mood is more toward the more realistic horrors. It's what really scares me. It seems to be what I am able to put down in a convincing manner, and that's why I pursue it.

**Woff&H:** At what point does this sort of "horror" become what we at least used to call crime fiction? Is there a meaningful difference between horror fiction and crime fiction?

**Lansdale:** I don't know that there always is a difference. I thought a lot of the stories I wrote were crime and that's where I tried to publish them, but the horror editors bought them. I thought "The Night They Missed The Horror Show" was a crime story. I had written part of it and had it lying around for a long time, and then David Schow was doing the anthology, *The Silver Scream*, and asked me to write a story for him. I said, "Well, I've got one, but it's not spooks. It's the stuff that really scares me. It's the attitudes that really scare me." And he said, "Hey, write it." So I did. And when I wrote *The Nightrunners*, I thought it was a suspense novel, and that's the way I tried to market it for five years. Nobody would buy it. A lot of the stuff that I wrote that was later published as horror, I wrote as crime or mainstream. I didn't have any idea it was horror. I have nothing against horror. It just never occurred to me. When people started buying it and wanting to call it horror, they didn't hurt my feelings any.

**Woff&H:** Since you're so much of a regional writer, your background must be important to what you write. So, could you describe where you grew up, traumatic childhood encounters with hatchet murderers, that sort of thing?

**Lansdale:** I had a real happy childhood. I did grow up very rural, small towns, in the country much of the time. My father couldn't read or write, but he was an extremely good man, a powerful man. I had sort of a Huck Finn existence growing up because of where I grew up, in East Texas. Most people when they think of Texas think of sand and cactus and stuff like that. Texas is very varied. Where I come from is more like Arkansas or Louisiana, a lot of woods and a lot of rivers and creeks.

I did grow up with a lot of old ghost stories, though. But as far as things that happened in my life, it mostly happened to others that I observed. And there were stories I heard my father tell. My father was in his forties when I was born, so it was sort of like being raised by grandparents, to some extent. My people date back through the Civil War. My grandmother, who died in her nineties, remembered travelling in a covered wagon and saw one of the last Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows.

So I grew up with a storyteller tradition, too, which a lot of East Texans have. I think that, in the past, a lot of it may have come out of the fact that they couldn't read or write. So they passed on what they wanted to tell through stories, which of course were embellished as they went. I heard stories from my father which were obviously stories handed down from the middle 1800s and still going. I've used variations of them. I don't think I've ever told any of them literally. I probably should, to preserve them. I'll probably tell my children those stories. But my background was rural, country. Among the people I grew up with, there was no college education at all. They were mostly blue collar, a lot of farm stock. My generation was the first where anyone went to college. I had a couple of years. My brother had a couple of years. I think his son, my nephew, is the first one to have a college education among the Lansdales that I know of, at least on my side of the group.

**Woff&H:** Coming as you did from such a background, what made you become a writer?

**Lansdale:** My mother was a reader, of non-fiction especially. But she always encouraged me to read, and by the time I was nine years old, I never wanted to be anything else. I really don't know how to explain it to you. I think a lot of writers find that. I don't know about you, but as a writer I seem to have a knack for remembering things from my childhood real well. I distort them a lot, for stories, which I'm sure every writer does, but I can't remember anyone coming to me and saying, "You ought to be a writer." I do remember wanting to be one since I was nine. I do remember, when I was about twelve or thirteen, discovering Edgar Rice Burroughs, and then I knew that was what I wanted to do. I read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as a kid. I used to keep the *Iliad* under my pillow because I read that Alexander the Great did that. I've just always been fascinated with stories.

**Woff&H:** Did your family encourage you?

**Lansdale:** Yeah, they did. My father, he always said, "Whatever you want to do, you'll do it." I never lacked for confidence. I don't want this to sound like plain ego. I certainly know how to fail, and I think learning how to fail is important too. But if you have confidence in yourself, failure doesn't scare you any. That's one thing that my parents instilled in me, confidence. They were very straight-ahead people, who always felt, "Eyes forward, ears back, go get it done."

**WoffF&H:** A lot of writers from blue-collar backgrounds encounter parental pressure to "get a real job."

**Lansdale:** My mother always used to say I should have something to fall back on. I think a lot of parents did that. I never really had anything to fall back on. I did all the blue collar jobs. I went to college for a little while, and I was going to be an archaeologist, but at some point I said, "Hey, I want to write." So I dropped out, I didn't drop out because of a lack of interest in archaeology but because I had a greater interest in writing and felt like what I was being taught in school wasn't helping me any. Even in the English courses I didn't think they knew what they were talking about, and for the most part, I still don't. I don't think a course in writing will do you any good unless it's taught by a writer who's published; somebody who's writing now, not someone who wrote thirty years ago.

**WoffF&H:** So you wouldn't want to take a course from a brain surgeon who had never taken a brain out . . .

**Lansdale:** Exactly.

**WoffF&H:** What sort of things did you do while you were learning to write?

**Lansdale:** Actually, I dug ditches. I was a bodyguard very briefly. I was a bouncer. I tried farm work. I was a janitor. I worked in public relations for Goodwill Industries, and as a transportation manager for Goodwill Industries as well. And, I worked in a rose field as a farm laborer for other people. Just every damn, dirty job you can think of. When I was in high school I worked on garbage trucks in the summer. Whatever there was to make a buck, to survive, I've done it.

**WoffF&H:** Presumably all this really paid off by adding to the background of your fiction.

**Lansdale:** Oh, yeah. That's where I get a lot of the assholes I write about, and all of the good people I write about too. Some of the best people I ever met, I met them on those jobs. And still, while a lot of the people I hang out with are writers, a lot of my friends are carpenters and people who do blue collar work. I generally prefer their company.

**WoffF&H:** Because they're more straightforward and less pretentious?

**Lansdale:** Yeah. Less bullshit. Also, too, I think it's because their backgrounds are similar to mine, so I know where they're coming from and what they're talking about, and I have a lot of respect for people who

make their living with their hands. I certainly couldn't do it, other than I was the guy who could lift the big rock. That's as good as I got. I didn't have any real skills. I wasn't a carpenter or a painter or anything. Everything I did like that, I screwed it up. [Laughs]

**WoffF&H:** How long were you trying to write before you started to sell?

**Lansdale:** It depends on how you look at it. I had been writing, as I said, since I was nine. It took me about two years from the time I decided I was going to start writing to when I started to sell. Actually, the first thing I sent out was an article I did when I was twenty-one. It sold. I did four more articles, and they all sold. Then I decided to switch to fiction, and I didn't sell anything for two years, I think. Then I started selling, and gradually it picked up, more and more. *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine* bought my first fiction, a thing called "The Full Count." It was a novella. I went on from there.

**WoffF&H:** The earliest thing of yours I can remember is *Dead in the West* as a serial in *Eldritch Tales*.

**Lansdale:** Which is very different from the book. The serialization is pretty sloppy. That's my fault. But, actually I had a novel before *Dead in the West*, which was *Act of Love*. And then I wrote one under a pen-name — Ray Slater — called *Texas Night Riders*. I wrote it in eleven days, and it shows. That was actually my first novel sale, but it came out three years after *Act of Love*. I was writing short stories well before that. In the middle to late '70s I was writing short stories for different magazines, and non-fiction for *True West* and *Frontier Times*.

**WoffF&H:** Have you thought to write more on the order of horrific westerns? You might be uniquely suited to do this.

**Lansdale:** It's occurred to me. I don't know that I will. I really would like to write westerns. I don't know that I'd want to do that and nothing else. I'm happy with what I'm doing now. I'm writing two crime novels for Mysterious Press right now. But I feel that the western aspect of my work is far from finished. At least I like to think so. As for there being more horrific westerns, I don't know.

**WoffF&H:** Does the western today have very specific, generic expectations which restrict the writer?

**Lansdale:** About like horror. About like science fiction. The same ones. It's there for every genre if you let it take you over. I don't think it's any more restrictive than any of the others. I think if you want to do interesting work, you can. When I wrote *The Magic Wagon*, I thought it was a western. It just had some potential fantasy elements in it. It depends on how you look at it. If you read it one way, there are no fantasy elements at all. But the characters perceive them as fantasy elements. So, I don't know. I don't think the restrictions in westerns are any worse than anywhere else. I think it's what you do with it. It's what you bring to it. If you can't find your own voice, if you can't find something about the subject that

interests you, you're going to write the same dull, old stuff.

**Woff&H:** How does the creation of a story occur for you? Do you write it out in a burst, or take notes, or what?

**Lansdale:** Very seldom do I ever take notes. Once in a while something will come to mind and I'll write it down on a sheet of paper and promptly lose it. But usually if I do write it down, it'll stick with me. But more likely, a couple of ideas will hit, and I'll think about them and I'll sit down — I work a regular schedule. I try to work in the mornings until noon, then take off for lunch and go back and work in the early afternoon. I used to do that seven days a week. I don't work seven days a week now. It's about five and a half.

But the stories vary. Usually it's some particular scene or a character will come to mind and a story will grow out of it, or an incident. But there's no set pattern to the way I work. I don't outline, if that's what you mean. I don't take a lot of notes. If I feel like a story needs research to make it believable, I'll research.

**Woff&H:** Have you had much feedback from the sort of people you write about? I don't particularly mean the crazed murderers, but the farmers and blue-collar-people. Do they read your stuff? How do they feel about it?

**Lansdale:** I haven't heard much from them. I've had a couple of people who wrote and said, "I hate niggers too," and I had to write back and say, "I think you missed the whole point of the story." They didn't catch the satire. A lot of my stories certainly have that interest or edge in them. I got that from Mark Twain. He's one of my favorite writers. But, other than that, no, not really.

**Woff&H:** A friend of mine once described the typical Joe Lansdale story as one in which, "You don't know whether to laugh or throw up."

**Lansdale:** [Laughs]

**Woff&H:** In order to prove the point, she then proceeded to read to those assembled, "My Dead Dog Bobby," from your *Pulphouse* collection.

**Lansdale:** I don't know what to say to that. Yeah, that's true. That story is certainly a sick puppy, if you'll pardon the expression.

**Woff&H:** You can read that story as horror or as humor. You've got both sides of the coin there.

**Lansdale:** I learned that from Robert Bloch. I doubt Robert Bloch would claim any connection to my stories. [Laughs] I love his work. I grew up on it. I think he showed me that horror and humor are very similar. You can walk an edge there. You can also fall off and the story can be destroyed. It can be too horrific, just plain ugly, nasty, or it can be just too damn funny to get your point across. So it's a hard line to walk, but that's what has always interested me, walking that line between the outrageous and the horrific. Actually I find that the outrageous stuff is what has actually *happened*. And that's what you'll think I made up. The stuff that seems not so outrageous, I made up.

**Woff&H:** You must indeed get some interesting fan mail.

**Lansdale:** Yeah, like I said, I get a note every now and then that says, "Yeah, I hate niggers too," and that upsets me, but I can't be the Cliff Notes for everybody. Most of the stuff I get is pretty intelligent. I was talking to a lot of other writers who have some real weird fans, and I've had a couple of odd things, but for the most part it's been real intelligent and interesting because they seem to run the gamut from your blue-collar to your academics who read it. A lot of the stuff that I've written has appeared in literary magazines, so it's an odd audience.

**Woff&H:** I'm surprised they'll let you be that violent in literary magazines.

**Lansdale:** Well, I don't know that they would publish "The Night They Missed the Horror Show." Some of the things that were done in literary mags were things like "Trains Not Taken," which is just strange. It's an alternate universe western sort of thing. There's that western influence again. And there was another one I did for a literary magazine, called "A Car Drives By," which was redone as "Not from Detroit." But I've also done some other oddball things of that nature that I wouldn't have expected to appear in those kind of magazines, but did.

**Woff&H:** No writer can remain creatively healthy and do the same thing over and over. Presumably there must be a limit to the number of stories of strange, secret rituals in back-country towns and to the number of crime-suspense novels you can write. What next? Where would you like to evolve as a writer?

**Lansdale:** I think you've got to change. If you look at the collection, *Stories by Mama Lansdale's Youngest Boy*, which contains primarily my earliest work, you'll see that most of it isn't about that at all. It's about weird false teeth and creatures out of the dump — more traditional horror subjects — and then you have the stuff in *By Bizarre Hands*, and then the stories I'm doing now are a bit different. They're much more crime-oriented. They're a little more traditional in structure, but I don't think of them as traditional stories. I think you have to change or else you die. I don't want to be known as the guy who writes the same type of story over and over. You can write one redneck story after another, but after a while, what's the point? I'm doing something new now, and I hope ten years from now to be doing something new again. I hope it doesn't take that long.

**Woff&H:** You also have to watch out for repetition of details or devices. I noticed recently when I put together a collection of my own stories that I had three stories in a row in which people came back from the dead and manifested themselves by rustling around in the kitchen. You had two stories in a row in *By Bizarre Hands* in which cars break down.

**Lansdale:** No matter what you do you're going to repeat some themes, but if you're careful you can try and not repeat them as often. But you have certain

themes and certain obsessions and you can't get away from them, but if you find new approaches and new ways to express yourself, you can do better work. I find that I'll think, "God damn, I used that element in some other story." So you're going to repeat yourself to some extent. But the idea is to tell a different story in a different way, and that's the best you can do. What makes your stories work if they work at all is the fact that you do have certain obsessions.

**Woff&H:** Most writers have a limited cast of characters. There are usually about five, and they're based on yourself, a few people you've known, and so on. But sometimes you deliberately try to vary this —

**Lansdale:** I think you can try so hard that you develop artificial material. Some people just have a very limited approach and there's not anything they can do about it, no matter how hard they try. I think to some extent, I have forced myself to relax and say, "Okay, just back off and let's just see what else is inside your head, and what new themes you can put into your work." The best thing to do is to be observant, to read a wider spectrum, to observe people, to run in different circles. That's what's happened to me in the last couple of years: my work is usually changing before I'm able to change it. By the time I'm writing certain stories, I already have a new attitude, new emotions, new stories in mind, and it'll take me two years to get to them. Recently Ellen Datlow said of one of my stories that this sort of thing — redneck horror — is getting tired. And if you really look, only seven or eight of my stories are like that. The rest of them are totally different. Those are the ones that people remember, see. I didn't think of it as a criticism. I thought superficially she was right. Technically she was wrong, because there's only a handful of stories of that nature. (I don't want people to remember just those.)

**Woff&H:** But if you wrote New England yuppie horror no one would believe you.

**Lansdale:** Well, I have to write what interests me. I don't write for other people so much as I write for myself. I think that's the best thing I can do, because I'm the one who's going to get bored quicker than anybody else over a certain type of story. I'm the guy who has to labor over a story that somebody might read in an hour or less. A story that may take me a week or a month to write. Or a novel might take six months or a year to write.

**Woff&H:** The public perception of your work is obviously based on what has been published. What about the material that hasn't yet appeared, which will surprise them?

**Lansdale:** I hope it'll surprise them. You never can tell. I don't want to say that the fiction I'm writing now is more upbeat — that implies something I don't mean to say — but it has a totally different attitude, even though the voice remains the same. I have no way to describe it until people see it and they can tell me. I seem to be working more directly into the crime field than horror. I am still using some of the off-the-wall

things that interest me, as for what kind of stew I put together, I guess the readers will have to tell me.

**Woff&H:** Do you think that you'll ever face a publisher-typecasting problem? I've always wondered what would happen if Stephen King wrote a romantic comedy. Would they bring it out with a black cover and something menacing on it?

**Lansdale:** Probably. Obviously I don't have the great popularity that Mr. King has, which makes him more of a brand name in the eyes of the publishers, but if you look at my books, for *Act of Love* I think it said "Novel" on the spine. *Dead in the West* was obviously published as horror. *The Nightrunners* was published as horror. The two *Drive-In* books were published as science fiction. *The Magic Wagon* was published as a western. *Cold in July* was published as a novel. *Savage Season* was suspense, although they're both akin to each other. *By Bizarre Hands*, horror. *Stories from Mama Lansdale's Youngest Boy*, horror. Now I'm doing two novels that are being published as crime-suspense from Mysterious Press. But I think everybody wants me to buy a label and say, "This is what I do." Probably the closest I've come to doing that is what I'm doing for Mysterious Press, because they're giving me an opportunity to reach out to a bigger audience. As for whether I will continue to say, "Yes, I'm a crime-suspense writer," that remains to be seen. As long as I am interested in those types of stories, I will write them. When I get interested in something else, I won't write them. Even though I'm doing these two for Mysterious Press, I'm also doing one small *Drive-In* book, the last one, and I am also doing a novel that takes place in East Texas in the 1930s and has some possible supernatural elements. So I am keeping the subjects mixed.

**Woff&H:** If you get popular enough in a certain way, some publisher may say, "Here's five million dollars. I want another book just like the last one."

**Lansdale:** I'm not that popular, and I've already had that. I've had publishers tell me "You're never going to make a career until you settle down to do one thing or another." And to some extent, Mysterious Press is saying, "Okay, we'll call these suspense novels, but what we want is Joe Lansdale." Obviously I'm not going to write a romance for them. It has to have a crime element. So much of my work has that anyway and I seem to naturally lean in that direction. I find suspense such an open and varying field. I think you could write a horror novel and it could be suspense, of a sort. I think it's true of science fiction, whatever. It excites me right now. It's a wide-open field. It's a different approach. Hey, they're paying me money too. I'm not in this just for the art. But I'm going to do what I think is both artistically-correct and Lansdale-correct. That's really all I can do.

**Woff&H:** Has there been any movie interest in your work?

**Lansdale:** I've sold a lot of it to the movies. *Cold in July* to John Irvin, who did *Ghost Story*; *Hamburger*

*Hill*; and *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. He's had a real varied career. He did the *Robin Hood* made for Fox. He's had *Cold In July* for about four years now. I did a screenplay for it. *Savage Season*, John Badham has that one. *The Drive-In* has been optioned. *Dead in the West* has been optioned four years in a row. There's interest in it again right now. "The Far Side of the Cadillac Desert" was optioned a couple years in a row. I don't know if it's going to be renewed or not. "The Pit" is supposed to be filmed soon. Whether it'll actually happen, or not, I don't know. I read the screenplay. It didn't owe a lot to my story that I could see. They used dialogue out of it, but they didn't understand the essence of it at all. And there's been some interest in a couple of others that I think will be nailed down before long.

And a lot of comic-book interest. There will be a lot of things adapted into comics, and I will be doing some original comics inspired from some of my stories. There will be a *By Bizarre Hands* comic book soon from Dark Horse Comics.

**WoffF&H:** Well, to wrap this up, any thoughts on where you'll be twenty years from now?

**Lansdale:** I hope I'll still be writing novels and short stories. I hope I'll still be writing films and comics. Primarily it's the prose that I'm interested in. Short stories are what I love, but right now I feel that I'm temporarily burned out in short stories. That's one reason I've put a lot more effort into the novels. But, who knows? I go where the wind blows, at least where the Lansdale wind blows.

**WoffF&H:** Thanks, Joe. Ω

## BAD MEAT

Not watching nor waiting  
But casually sitting,  
Aware that awareness  
Is rarely quite fitting,

It snorts once for nothing  
And rubs its fat belly,  
And laughs that it's living  
And stuck in a deli.

The chilly display case,  
With pickled boned herring,  
And olive bologna,  
And customers leering,

It only need thump once  
To dissuade all from buying,  
But instead it sits pretty —  
An enticement to trying.

— Frederick Stansfield

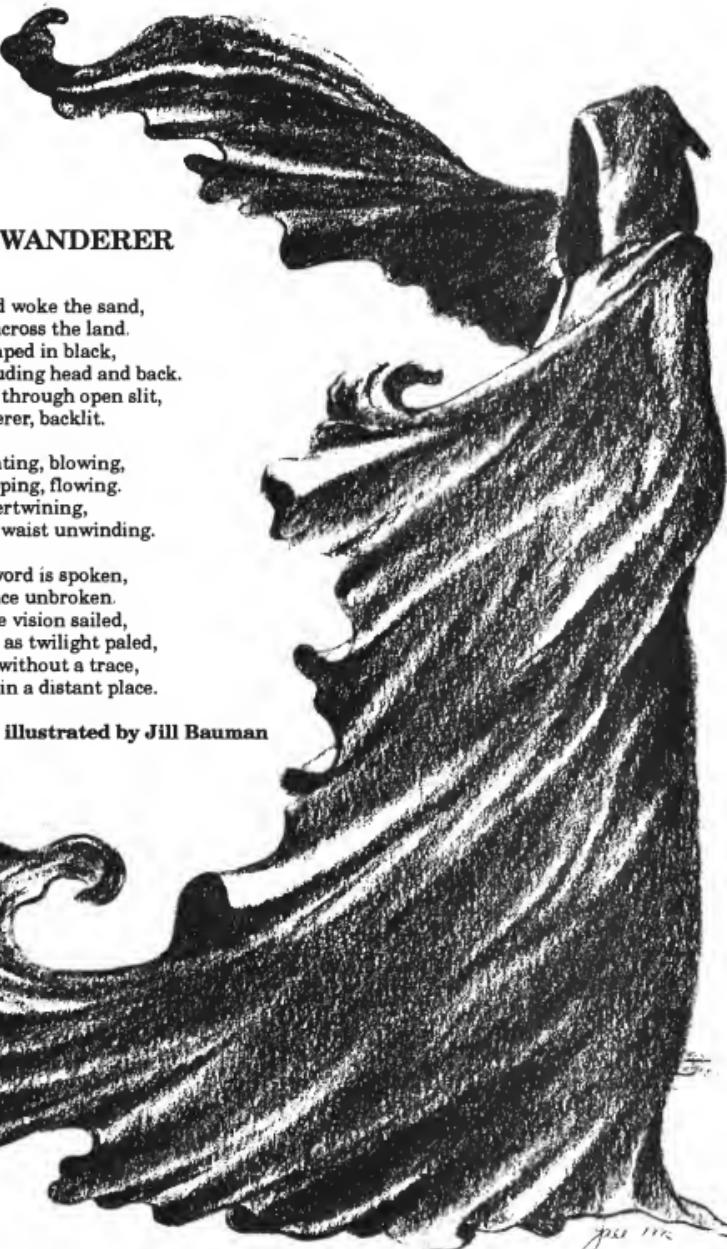
## SOMEWHERE, UNDER THE RAINBOW

The ghost of Judy Garland  
Is visible at night:  
Alphethemine-white phantom  
loats through moon-mist light.

The Emerald City's toppled,  
The yellow bricks are dust,  
And Dorothy's dead in Kansas;  
Tin Woodman's gone to rust.

The ghost of Judy Garland  
Is audible as well —  
New York, New York's her kind of town —  
Manhattan-angel's Hell.

— Steve Eng



## THE WANDERER

Sunrise blazed and woke the sand,  
Shimmered light across the land.  
A lonely figure draped in black,  
Cowl loosely shrouding head and back.  
No feature shown through open slit,  
The eternal wanderer, backlit.

Winds of time bleating, blowing,  
Robes forever flapping, flowing.  
Pleated layers intertwining,  
Ropes around the waist unwinding.

Not a whispered word is spoken,  
All is said; the peace unbroken.  
Horizon bound the vision sailed,  
He fell from earth as twilight paled,  
And disappeared without a trace,  
Emerged at dawn in a distant place.

— by and illustrated by Jill Bauman

# FATHER VADIM'S ANGEL

## by Donna Farley

illustrated by Keith Minnion

March's unkind wind shrieked at the doors of Saint Philoskotia's Orthodox Church. Inside, Father Vadim's guardian angel felt a nervous flickering run through his luminescence as he watched the congregation preparing for the first service of Lent, vespers with the rite of mutual forgiveness. This ceremony consisted in each member of the parish prostrating himself before each of the others in turn, saying, "Forgive me, my brother," or "Forgive me, my sister."

The first year of Father Vadim's appointment, many of his parishioners had avoided the vesper service altogether, but they were cured of their truancy thereafter when Father spent the entire next day seeking them out at their homes and workplaces to fall on his face before them, begging forgiveness and then taking them into an enthusiastic bear hug. They had little choice but to respond, but some of them never did learn to look their priest in the eye during the now-annual rite.

Father Vadim's guardian angel was named Ariel — no relation to the Shakespearian sprite, his name meant "lion of God." It was appropriate, for he had been fiercely devoted to his charge for fifty-seven years now.

"The man is a living saint," the angel remarked to his partner as they watched the mortals exchanging forgiveness. If the observed could have become observers, the angels would have appeared as man-sized balls of light, their intensity varying from moment to moment with the spiritual states of their charges.

Shelumiel, Ariel's partner of over thirty years (being in charge of Father's *matushka*) responded to Ariel's remark by allowing his globular luminescence to throb slowly, the angelic equivalent of a nod.

Ariel had made the same remark many times before. It was usually occasioned by the priest's patient response to the slings and arrows of the outrageous president of the parish, Andrei Skolopsky, who regularly denounced such damnable offenses as Father's insistence on the use of English as opposed to Slavonic, or his rather pointed sermons about drunkenness or tithing. Poor Shelumiel's protégée, *Matushka* Tamara, would weep bitterly, railing at this continual nastiness. Her husband took it all in stride; yet nowhere was his holiness more apparent than at this first service of Lent each year.

Ariel could not help casting a slightly worried glance at his partner. On Forgiveness Sunday in previous

years, Ariel knew, *Matushka* Tamara's soul had been like the moon: clouded with bitterness and anger, it had taken an immense amount of energy from Shelumiel to clear the darkness so his ward could once again shine, reflecting the Light of all. But this year, she was like a damnable black hole, draining her guardian's light into a pit of sinful despair.

There were unfortunately many church members at Forgiveness Vespers that evening whose shameless hypocrisy had long ago caused their guardians to desert them, and some even had demons tagging at their heels. One purpose of the forgiveness rite, though the participants little suspected it, was to drive away devils and re-attract estranged guardian angels to newly-cleaned souls.

Shelumiel's luminescence suddenly ebbed alarmingly as Andrei, having escaped the beaming and forgiving Father Vadim, made his reluctant prostration before the priest's wife.

*Matushka* stood mute and trembling, clutching her skirt with white knuckles. When Andrei stood up and muttered, "Forgive me, my sister," she turned slowly on her heel and walked down the nave and out the doors of the church.

"Tamara!" cried Shelumiel, though of course only the other angels could hear him, and they were too busy with their own charges to spare more than a glance for the spiritually repulsive woman.

"Shelumiel!" Ariel said, for his partner was hovering motionless beside him. "For Heaven's sake, get after her. You can't leave her alone in that state!"

"I . . . I can't do it," moaned Shelumiel, his celestial voice all stretched thin and scratchy. Ariel realized his partner's powers were even more shockingly depleted than he had imagined.

"Shelumiel, your luminescence wouldn't light a birthday candle! Why did you let it get so low — you should have left her long ago!" Ariel chided him.

When Shelumiel did not reply, Ariel sent a call for aid Heavenward. To his surprise, an immediate response came in the form of a very highly placed archangel, a flaming presence who made the crowd of simple guardian angels look like so many faint stars beside a brilliant sun. The archangel gathered up Shelumiel's essence and prepared to rapture him back to Heaven.

"Shelumiel is on furlough as of now," the archangel informed Ariel. "You are assigned to watch your

partner's ward until we can find another worker strong enough to take her on."

"Me?" Ariel's own luminescence suddenly paled.

"You needn't leave your own work. Just do what you can for her whenever she's with your man."

"Please, Ariel," Shelumiel said faintly, "for the sake of our partnership, keep watch on her for me!"

Ariel observed Father Vadim for a few moments as he wound up the service, then turned back to the impatiently flickering essence of the archangel. "I'll do my best, but Father has so many trials himself —"

"So have we all," the archangel remarked unsympathetically. "What with the population explosion and all, the guardian angel shortage is getting desperate. Don't expect any help for a while." And with that the double luminescence vanished back to the celestial plane, leaving Ariel to trail Father Vadim out of the church to the car, where *Matushka* sat weeping behind the wheel.

"Ah, my dear, don't cry," said Father as he slipped into the car and put one arm around her.

"I have plenty to cry about!" she shrieked. "I hate Andrei Skolopsky! I hate this wicked parish! I hate the whole Church and I hate God too!"

Father stroked his beard sadly and thoughtfully. Ariel shuddered at the blasphemy and huddled in the far corner of the car, as far as possible from the putrefying spiritual bog the woman had become.

Tamara jammed the key savagely into the ignition and started the engine. Ariel's essence tingled with apprehension, and he hovered closer to Father.

"Tamara dear, let me drive," Father said gently.

"I want to drive!" said Father's wife, and put the vehicle into reverse. It lurched out of the rector's parking space, and she shifted to drive and shot out of the parking lot, narrowly missing several parishioners whose guardian angels glared redly at the hapless Ariel.

The car blasted down the road like the proverbial infernal bat.

"Tamara, stop!" cried Father. "You will kill us!"

"Good!" she screamed back. "No more Andrei, no more nasty gossip, no more Forgiveness Vespers!"

Ariel saw the impact coming, and slipped into telescopic time. While he hovered, time slowed to a near-stop, and he eased out of the car to examine the site of the accident-to-be.

Father's wife had been doing thirty miles over the limit, and a bump in the road had forced the steering wheel out of her control, placing the car's trajectory on a collision course with an eighteen-wheel truck.

Ariel picked over the scenario as if he had all the time in the world — which he did, but the longer he remained in telescopic time, the more of his resources he used. Furthermore, to create any physical effect that would alter the course of the impending crash, Ariel would be forced to assume a material form. Such an energy-draining metamorphosis might leave him unable to phase back to his natural pure energy form



for a while. Worse, he could be caught in the impact himself. That wouldn't mean death, as it would for a mortal, but it would mean a lengthy convalescence in Heaven, longer than Shelumiel's furlough. He would almost certainly be unable to return to work in Father Vadim's lifetime.

That thought made him desperate, for he was fonder and prouder of his current assignment than he had ever been of any other protégé. He floated over to where the truck driver sat frozen behind his wheel, not yet aware of the car that was poised to hurtle into his front end like a meteor. Ariel did not like what he saw. Even with help from an angel, there was just too much truck there for the driver to turn it out of the way fast enough.

Ariel flashed back to Father's car. He could see no way to fix the problem but to jerk the wheel out of *Matushka's* hands and replace it on the right path.

Ah, but would such a close call do anything to alter her dangerous hysteria? She could just as easily cause another accident a few moments from now — *now* being the moment when Ariel had stepped out of realtime. And he had no illusions that he would have any resources left to cope with a second crash.

There was one other possibility. Though the thought of such a failure made Ariel's luminescence whirl dizzily, like snowflakes in a blizzard, he did not see how the archangel could fault him, under the circumstances. His primary duty, after all, was to his own charge. What he would do would be to haul Father Vadim free of the car here in telescoped time, then allow the impact to occur as projected.

And so, outside the car again now, Ariel steeled himself for the miraculous effort and coalesced his luminescence into a pseudo-corporeal form. In telescoped time, no one would see him even if he took the appearance of a businessman in a three-piece suit; but even in realtime, this present form would be invisible to any but prophets and saints, of whom there were precious few;<sup>13</sup> this twentieth-century midwestern city. This was the form the celestial hosts had been using when Elisha prayed for his servant's eyes to be opened; Elisha, of course, being a prophet, had been able to see them all along.

It was a very powerful form, able to accomplish physical feats far beyond human capacity, but it used an accordingly large amount of energy, and Ariel gave up any hope of an immediate return to his pure energy form. Perhaps most worrisome, his spiritual powers were rendered almost inert; but the first thing was to get Father out of this alive.

A sword of light swung at Ariel's side, but he had no need of it for this task. He tentatively flexed the wings attached to his ox-like shoulders, which would tower above the average man's head, then reached for the car door.

Here in telescopic time, it took a monumental effort simply to lift a handle and swing open a door. Father, frozen with a worry-puckered brow and one hand

reaching for his wife's shoulder, might as well have been a statue of solid bronze. Straining every angelic muscle, Ariel lifted the priest out of the car and staggered backward to the roadside, dropping him just as he slid back into realtime.

Behind him, Ariel barely heard the sickening squeal and smash of the impact, for to his horror he found that Father Vadim had hit his head on the pavement, knocking his glasses askew, and now seemed to be unconscious.

"Oh, Heaven!" cried the angel, bending over his charge. "Father!"

A cluster of onlookers gathered, and Ariel stood up, searching the road impatiently for any sign of an ambulance. When it finally came, the paramedics gave Father a cursory examination, then went to extract the truck driver from his cab, which was crumpled up like a discarded paper cup. Ariel hung about the paramedics, trying to implant suggestions that they should give the man at the curb a second look.

But then the angel remembered that such powers of suggestion were beyond the capacity of his present form. Helpless and frustrated, he paced around the site, barely remembering to side-step people and broken glass. Once the trucker was on the stretcher, one of the paramedics turned to the broken remains of Father's poor wife, who had been thrown clear through the window of the car, bounced off the front end of the truck, and hit the pavement with bloody finality.

Ariel shook his head. Shelumiel was going to feel badly, but perhaps it was best for him — he deserved a somewhat easier case next time.

At last one of the paramedics began to tend the angry-looking lump on Father's left temple. When a second ambulance arrived, and they had gotten him onto the stretcher, Father's wise eyes fluttered open. Ariel nearly clapped his wings for relief.

"Tamara?" the priest asked.

"Just rest, sir, we'll be at the hospital soon," said the paramedic, and closed the ambulance doors. Ariel spread his wings and lifted to the top of the ambulance, where he clung until they reached the hospital. Once there the examination and x-rays turned up nothing serious, but the bad news about *Matushka* had to be broken.

"My Tamara? Dead?" Father suddenly looked older than fifty-seven, and his eyes spilled over.

"I'm very sorry, sir," the doctor said, professionally sympathetic. "Now, I suggest you stay overnight — it's best to be careful with head injuries. It's a miracle you weren't hurt worse."

Ariel trailed the gurney into the room, which happily had no other occupant, and settled his Goliath frame into a chair to pass the night on watch.

But Father Vadim did not go to sleep, and went on quietly weeping in the dark until Ariel almost thought his own eyes would overflow, had angels been capable of tears. At last he reached out to touch Father's arm.

"Oh, dear Father, console yourself!" he said.

The priest stiffened suddenly, and there was silence. Then his familiar, Slavic-accented voice in the dark: "Who is there?"

Had Ariel had any blood, it would have drained abruptly from his face. As it was, he perceived in his material form a horrifying numbness which intensified as Father sat up and snapped on the light.

Ariel telegraphed an immediate SOS to Heaven. Shocked at first to find there was no reply, he soon realized that this was another drawback of his present, unspiritual form. Unlike members of the Adamic race, who were forced to rely on faith, Ariel had the advantage of knowing that his prayers were heard; but to be left in suspense as to the reply gave him an unexpected taste of what faith must be like.

"Who are you?" Father asked again, scrabbling for his glasses on the night table. Ariel stood up, watching the now-bespectacled human eyes grow rounder and rounder.

Not knowing what else to do, he said, "I am Ariel!"

"Lord have mercy!" said the priest, crossing himself. He set aside the blankets and began to ease off the high hospital bed, reaching toward the floor for a *poklon*.

"No, no, Father! Please, get back in bed!" said Ariel, taking him by the arm. "I am only your guardian angel, you know!" Ariel was hotly embarrassed at Father's offering of the reverential gesture; the very fact that Father could see his guardian angel was tangible proof of what Ariel had always said, that Father Vadim Karizomenoff was a *bona fide* saint and so destined for a celestial exaltation far above anything the humble guardian angel would ever desire for himself.

"You have come to tell me about Tamara?" Father asked hopefully.

"I — I haven't really come, as you put it, Father. I have been with you all along. It is only that — that a change in my form has made it possible for you to see me."

The priest looked puzzled. "But — O blessed guardian angel, can you not comfort me with the knowledge that my dear wife is in the heavenly mansions?"

The blunt question staggered Ariel, for it was not possible for the angel to lie. *Matushka*'s soul had been encrusted with the foulest growth of sinful bitterness at the moment when Ariel stepped back into realtime. He had not observed the moment of her death, to see whether her soul had been taken by his co-workers — or by the enemy.

"Perhaps I can find out," he stammered. He could not look at those sad, saintly eyes and say nothing.

"Ah! then you have made this appearance out of your kindness solely to console me! O holy angel, I thank you from the bottom of my heart!" Father's gratitude beamed through his grief.

Ariel was feeling the agony of his angelic honesty. "Oh, Father, it was not my design at all that you should see me!" he said, and explained that he had taken his pseudo-corporeal form only to rescue Father.

Father Vadim nodded, stroking his beard thought-

fully. "O my angel, how I thank you for your devotion! To trap yourself in this inconvenient form to help me." He sighed. "Ah, tell me, had my Tamara no such good protector as yourself, that I live and she is dead?"

Ariel shook his head. "Ah, no, Father, at the time her angel had been driven off by her terrible state of mind . . ."

Father looked hurt. "But surely he left her when she needed him most!"

"Shelumiel couldn't help it," Ariel said. "Why, the state of her soul would have tried the very cherubim and seraphim!"

Father Vadim tearfully made the sign of the cross. "Ah, may God forgive me that I did not take her away from this terrible parish long ago!"

"Now, Father," said Ariel. "You are in no way to blame."

"O my angell!" the priest lamented. "Could you not have saved my Tamara?"

Compelled to answer truthfully, Ariel said, "Well, I could have, but I was more worried about you."

"About me? Come, come! I am a sinful man, but I am fresh from Forgiveness Vespers, resting in the mercy of the Lord! Do you mean you might have spared my Tamara, so she might have time for repentance, and yet you did not?" Father Vadim was looking at Ariel as if he had made some unthinkable assertion, such as that the creed was untrue, or that Father was not a priest. As if Ariel were anything but a holy angel. "How much better that I should have died than her!"

"Father, don't talk like that," Ariel said firmly. "She did bring it on herself, you know —"

Maybe if Ariel had had his spiritual faculties he would have seen that it was the wrong thing to say, before the words were out, instead of after.

"Tell me again," the priest said gruffly. "Tell me, I cannot believe it. You could have saved her, but did not?"

"Yes. But —"

"Then I do not want you for my guardian angel!" he shouted. "Go back to Heaven!"

Ariel stared in dismay. "I can't do that. I have to stay by you —"

"Go, I tell you!" Father's voice rose to a shriek. "Get out of my sight for good, to Hell if not to Heaven!"

The clamor brought hospital staff, who soon tranquilized the poor hallucinating old widower, and left Ariel once more in the dark with his charge.

In the morning, when Father was pronounced fit to go home, Ariel paced worriedly after his protégé as he checked out of the hospital. Father pulled the cab door shut behind him in Ariel's face, and Ariel was forced to use some of his precious energy to pass through it, slipping between the molecules.

At Father's apartment, Ariel skulked about the kitchen, almost feeling the chill of the priest's cold shoulder.

Father stuck his nose into his favorite book, *The Way*

of a Pilgrim, drank tea and ate toast, and Ariel realized that he too was hungry. In his natural form he fed on sunlight, but his present body was that of a celestial soldier, and he needed his C-rations. Unfortunately, not having set out from headquarters in this form, he had brought no manna to sustain him.

His gaze went to the icon above the kitchen table where Father sat. It was Rublev's famous "Old Testament Trinity," the depiction of the three angels receiving Abraham's hospitality.

"Pardon me, Father, but could I ask you for a little bread?"

Father scowled at him, then turned back to his book and lifted his teacup again.

Ariel cleared his throat. When he got no response, he lifted the icon off the wall and placed it on the table by Father's plate.

Father put down his book and stared at the icon. He took off his glasses, peering at the picture, then replaced them. He stood up, and lifting the icon carefully in both hands, he kissed it and replaced it on the wall. Then he sat down and took another bite of toast as he found his place on the page again.

Ariel was alarmed. Since Father had refused him hospitality, it would be theft to use anything available in the apartment. Without any kind of food at all, it could take forever to build his reserves in preparation for the metamorphosis back to his normal form. But overshadowing his personal hunger was his worry over the spiritual danger in Father's attitude.

The food problem was temporarily solved that afternoon, when Father's sister arrived with a vast array of pickles, piroshki, cakes, bread and fish for the use of funeral guests, who streamed in and out of the apartment for several days. Ariel reasoned that he was enough like one of the family that it would be permissible to sneak a honey cake or two as long as everyone else was eating too.

The funeral itself was uneventful. After the third day *panikhida* service Father's sister packed up and went home; after the seventh, her food was all gone too. Lent settled in, in earnest; and Father, ascetic that he was, fared on nothing but beans and bread the whole time, of which he never left a crumb that Ariel might glean in good conscience. Instead, the angel subsisted on the bits of *antidoron* left after the liturgies each Sunday. Since that bread was merely blessed and not part of the sacramental Body and Blood in the chalice, Ariel thought it good enough for angels as well as mortals.

On the fortieth day, Father again held a *panikhida*, which was customary. How often he had done this memorial service for departed parishioners, compassionately ushering the bereaved into the new reality of life without their loved one. *Matushka*'s *panikhida*, however, was attended only by a half-dozen old *babas* who frequented any and all church services, like birds at a winter feeder. To Ariel's surprise, they were joined at the last moment by Andrei Skolopsky.

It was Palm Sunday, for in the Eastern church the forty days of Lent are counted separately from Holy Week. Andrei and the *babas* followed Father to *Matushka*'s grave in the churchyard, still clutching the pussy-willows that replace palms in the Slavic tradition, and muttered "*hospodi pomiloi*" in response to the priest's English petitions. When the old ladies had held out their cupped hands for a blessing and kissed Father's hand and left, Andrei (hands in pockets — no blessing for him, *spaceeba*) said gruffly, "You come our house tonight, Father. Palm Sunday fish dinner, like in old country."

He walked off without waiting for an acceptance of the invitation, and Father smiled.

Ariel smiled, too, broadly. Then Father's eyes met the angel's and the priest, sobering, went to remove his vestments, all business and ritual.

At Andrei's house, Father slammed the door in the face of his long-suffering angel, as he had done repeatedly all throughout Lent. Ariel worried that sooner or later his resources would be so low that he would no longer be able to walk through doors. This time however, he squeezed through, and breathed in the smell of baked fish as if it were the very incense of Heaven.

Ariel leaned against the door as the humans sat down to dinner. The Skolopskys' black and white cat rubbed up against the angel's legs, purring, and Ariel couldn't help feeling grateful to the creature. (Cats of course can see pseudo-materialized angels, but they don't seem to distinguish them from humans.)

Now the smell of the fish was making his mouth water, though he cringed at the very idea of eating the flesh of a creature that had once had breath in it. He spent the whole dinner hour in torture, but by the time Father and Andrei had retreated to the living room, Ariel had made up his mind to break his fast.

Mrs. Skolopsky began to pick scraps off the fish bones and put them in the cat's dish, dropping the bones in the garbage. She put all the other leftovers in the refrigerator and took the laden tea-tray out to the living room.

The cat attacked its bowl, purring joyously, and Ariel's heart sank. With a sigh he pried the lid off the trash can and pulled out the bones. He sat down beside the cat, and began to munch, feeling his angelic metabolism responding favorably to the fresh fuel, skeletal though it was. He relaxed a little, and stroked the cat's fur as he ate.

Suddenly the telephone on the counter jangled, and in the living room Father Vadim leapt from his seat saying, "Ah, I nearly forgot, Vanya was to call me here at seven o'clock. Excuse me please!"

Ariel felt as if he were a frozen being in telescoped time. Father Vadim burst into the kitchen and stopped, staring at the spectacle of his guardian angel, reduced to eating garbage.

The telephone rang several more times.

Father Vadim tore his eyes from the angel and picked up the receiver.

Ariel scarcely heard the inconsequential conversation. The remainder of the bones slipped from his fingers. With a mounting horror, he realized that he had let hunger drive him to the unthinkable, to voluntarily remaining in a separate room from his charge. Thank Heaven no evil had come of it! When Father hung up the phone (now pretending that he did not see the angel), Ariel tagged meekly behind him, and stood in a corner of the living room for the rest of the evening.

The following Sunday was of course Easter, the Feast of Feasts. The abundance of the midnight Paschal feast left plenty even for a famished angel.

But when Easter was over, pickings were slim again. The summer passed, then Advent and Christmas, and the new year came in with Epiphany house blessings. Ariel had not spoken to Father since the day they came home from the hospital, but on the final Saturday before the beginning of Lent — one year since *Matushka's* death — Ariel decided it was time for radical action.

He stood by Father's place at the breakfast table, respectfully waiting until grace was said and Father had seated himself before his tea, toast, and jam.

"Father Vadim, may I have some bread?" asked Ariel. But the priest only twitched one eyelash, imperceptibly to any eyes but an angel's, at this sudden shattering of the year-long silence.

Ariel wished that he could weep. If he had had access to his spiritual faculties, what changes would Ariel perceive in his protégé's spiritual state since the first time Father had refused the holy duty of hospitality? What Ariel could perceive was the dangerous deterioration of his own health. In such desperate straits, would it be permissible for him to duck out for a half hour to scrounge a meal in the garbage bins of a nearby restaurant?

He at once answered himself with a resounding NO. The demons were only too delighted to exploit the briefest of moments when the guardian was repelled by some sin committed by his charge. Ariel was suddenly puzzled by his own tenacity. He would have thought that a sinful episode like this would reduce any soul to a state much like *Matushka Tamaras*, and yet Ariel did not feel repulsed by Father at all, but only very fearful indeed for the priest's soul. Perhaps, Ariel thought, without any spiritual senses I am not reading the situation correctly, and . . . Suddenly he was overwhelmed with horror. What if Ariel had indeed chosen wrongly at the accident? He had done the best he knew how to do — but Father Vadim was a saint, and Ariel only a lowly guardian angel.

What if Father's anger were only righteous indignation?

Ariel stared at the priest, who was placidly pouring himself another cup of tea and reading *The Way of a Pilgrim* as piously as ever. Supposing Ariel was guilty

of presumptive pride — was that the reason no help came from Heaven when he cried for it?

His wings were trembling. If any charge of his had ever had fears about having committed sin without knowing it, Ariel would have been swift to redirect the mortal's thoughts to the practicality of known sin. But Ariel was not of Adam's race, so sin was something he only knew second-hand.

Ariel followed Father Vadim on his pastoral rounds that day in a daze. When Father said his bedtime prayers, Ariel forgot himself and chimed in with a heartfelt "Lord have mercy!" which the priest managed to ignore completely. The angel took up his sentry position by Father's bed, praying to the still silent Heaven with such absorption that he didn't notice quite when the priest fell asleep. He noticed immediately, however, when the devil appeared on the other side of Father's bed.

The intruder was not The Devil, of course, but one of his minions. The fallen angel looked much like Ariel himself, a tall, man-like figure with wings, but with the tell-tale light of infernal fire in his eyes.

Ariel drew his light sword to warn off the daring spirit, but to his horror found he was brandishing an impotent, bladeless hilt; the vanished sword, an extension of his own angelic power, proved that he was even more debilitated than he had realized.

The demon laughed, but Ariel launched himself protectively across Father Vadim's sleeping form. "Go back to Hell, traitor! You have no right to be here!"

The devil stepped back, carefully avoiding actual contact with the guardian angel, but he still grinned smugly. "I've been here for months. You just didn't happen to see me."

Ariel felt weak as never before. He couldn't hope to handle this alone in his present state!

"No answer, eh?" the Satanic angel gloated.

"No," said Ariel. "I won't talk to you."

The devil's eyes gleamed. "You can't keep from listening though. And at least I *will* talk to you, which is more than I can say for your heavenly compatriots."

When Ariel said nothing, the devil went on, "See, I used to be a guardian angel too. I made a mistake and ended up being shunned, like you. It's bad publicity for Him you see, if His servants are less than perfect. But He's supposed to be so damned merciful and all, so they shun you like this, and pretend it's like a test, so when you cave in and take up with us rebels, they can say you chose it yourself. And don't be fooled — if it doesn't work the first time, they'll put you in a tougher spot next time. Sooner or later you'll be damned to Hell, because Heaven wants rid of you."

Lies, lies, lies. At least it appeared Father Vadim was not yet reprobate enough for a soul-reaping hellion to be sent for him, for this angel of darkness was an ordinary tempter, doubtless no higher in Hell's hierarchy than Ariel was in Heaven's.

"God, look at you," the devil shook his head. "Not much left of you. The pity is it's all for nothing. After

all, this bugger's already damned you himself. You remember at the hospital?"

Heaven's mercy! Had the demon been with them that long?

"He told you to go to Hell, pal. The guy is a priest, a saint. Remember all that stuff about binding and loosing? He's got the authority to send you to Hell, he really does. And what do you expect? You botched the accident, you let his wife die in a state of mortal sin."

"She did?" Suddenly it no longer seemed as if he really had done his best at the accident.

"Hell, yes," the evil angel laughed, and Ariel felt himself shrivelling inwardly. If he listened to much more of this devilish talk, he was going to be mired in the certainty of his own guilt. Instantly he made an action decision, and began to shake Father Vadim. "Father! Wake up! Pray your *chotki*, Father!"

"Cheez!" The devil suddenly winked out of sight, just as the groggy priest sat up in bed, mumbling the Jesus prayer. He continued muttering and telling knots, gradually slowing down until he came awake. Then he fixed a furious eye on the anxious guardian angel.

"Father, there was a demon here!"

Father Vadim crossed himself. "I think there still is."

"Yes, I think so, he's just dematerialized to avoid being seen by you—" Suddenly Ariel realized the priest was referring to *him*. "Father," Ariel whispered, "take care not to blaspheme the Holy Spirit!"

"Holy Spirit? Will you call yourself the Holy Spirit?"

Ariel wished he could sink into the ground. "You know I am a guardian angel. Angels are holy—"

"You killed my wife! This is a guardian? This is the work of a holy angel? You are more like the angel of death that was sent for Pharaoh's firstborn!"

When Ariel merely stood there in silent misery, the priest said, "Hmph!" and crawled under the blankets again.

In the thornings, Ariel trailed after Father to the church, swaying dizzily for lack of food until he could gather some crumbs from the *antidoron* tray when Liturgy was over. It kept him in one piece for the rest of the day, but when it was time for the Forgiveness Vespers service again, he felt hungrier than ever.

He phased out through the door of the car with great difficulty into the March wind and rain, and found himself many paces behind Father on his way up to the church. Alarmed, he quickened his pace, but the church door slammed shut in his face. Parishioners were arriving, and he had to stand aside for them. To his dismay he was unable to sneak in behind anyone, for they all pulled the door quickly shut behind them against the rain, until he was alone in the downpour with the vesper bells ringing.

Grasping the latch handle, he pulled the door open a crack and peered in. Half a dozen heads turned toward the creaking door, Andrei Skolopetky's among them, and Ariel let it go again. If he wanted to avoid

attention, the energy-draining walk through the door was his only choice.

His drenched wings felt like a hundred-pound hiking pack on the shoulders of an old man. Sending one more prayer Heavenward, he summoned all of his fading strength to vibrate his molecules and slip them between those of the door. But as he stepped forward the molecular vibration died, and his body met solid oak. Ariel stared wide-eyed at the cross-inscribed obstacle.

"Having some trouble?" a voice behind him asked, and Ariel whirled to see the demon's hateful grin. "I'd like chat," the enemy went on, "but I don't want to get my wings wet." Carefully avoiding the cross on the door, he stepped through the wall and into the church.

"No!" Ariel cried in terror. "Father Vadim!" Abandoning stealth, he flung open the door, ducking into the building.

"Boothe moi, what a wind!" said Andrei, and pulled the door closed again. Ariel slouched past him into the nave, trying not to jostle the assembled faithful, his sodden wings trailing behind him.

"Where's that water come from? The roof must be leaking!" Ariel hardly heard the comments, his attention glued to Father Vadim. The demon evidently had only materialized in order to needle Ariel, and had now vanished again.

Without the spiritual perceptions he had had last year, Ariel felt blind. All over the church, he knew, demons were being freed loose from the coattails of people they had been afflicting, and formerly estranged guardian angels were hovering about their charges like joyous, affectionate globes of light. But all Ariel could see was mortals prostrating themselves, embracing, murmuring, "Forgive me, my brother; forgive me, my sister."

Ariel seated himself out of the way on the chancel step behind the great Golgotha cross which had been stationed in the center of the nave for the occasion. At last it was Andrei who stood in front of Father. Was Ariel imagining it, or did Andrei appear more sincere than he had ever done on one of these occasions?

Suddenly Ariel leapt to his feet, thinking that not only his energy but also his intelligence must have been dulled by his starvation. Mortals needed not only to be forgiven — they also needed to forgive! He came around to stand on the Saint John side of the Golgotha, until the last of the parishioners had made their prostrations, first to the crucified Christ, then to Father Vadim and their fellow parishioners on the Mother of God's side of the cross. Then Ariel himself took a step towards the crucifix; but suddenly, there before him, was his demonic rival.

"Give it up," said the devil. "You can't beat Hell. Join it instead."

Ariel made to step around the demon, but his enemy swiftly countered his move. Ariel tried again, only to find a sword of black flame barring his way.

"Join us," said the tempter, "or I cut you down, and

your man will be without a guardian anyway until he repents, if ever."

Ariel was shamed now, at a whole year's failure to draw his charge out of the spiritual quagmire he'd fallen into. But Father Vadim without a guardian — that was the part that hurt.

The devil still blocked the way to Father Vadim. Ariel turned and prostrated himself before the cross.

"Fool," the demon sneered. "That was never for angels. Only for sons of Adam, He's one of them Himself, for crying out loud. Why should an angel want to run with His pack?"

Ariel forced himself up onto his knees, groaning under the weight of his soaking wings. He wished desperately that his angelic body were equipped with the adrenaline that could galvanize a human into profitable action under such pressure, but everything here depended solely on the strength of Ariel's will — and whatever it was that Heaven willed.

"I will not be separated from my charge," he said through clenched teeth, and slowly raised himself to his feet. The demon was cockily swinging his sword.

Ariel caught Father Vadim's eye for the first time, but found he could not tell: was there any more forgiveness there than there had been on the day of the accident?

The demon glanced over his shoulder at the priest, who had turned his attention away and was now reciting some concluding prayers. The tempter grinned triumphantly, dropping the sword languidly to his side again.

"Game over," he said. "Next time, maybe you'll be smart enough to play on the winning team."

But Ariel gathered up his few remaining tatters of strength and catapulted himself past the devil. At the last moment, the surprised demon's sword came up to slice through Ariel's middle. The angel screamed; the demonic blade, intangible, did not physically cut him, but it severed the flow of energy in his inner being, siphoning it off. He toppled forward, one arm outstretched toward Father Vadim, and crashed at the priest's feet.

A bare spark of energy remained, the essence of Ariel's immortal angelic self, which could not be taken from him even by a Hell-forged sword. With all of that atom of power he strained to touch the hem of Father Vadim's stole and to speak two words. "Forgive . . . me."

Incapable of losing consciousness, he lay utterly still on the church floor, powerless even to seek Father Vadim's face. He could hear the devil muttering profanities, and then everything was so still that Ariel almost thought he was in telescoped time again.

Then there was a rustling of vestments above his head, and he saw Father Vadim's head lowered to the floor, level with his own. The priest slipped his hands under the angel's inert arms, lifting him to his knees and supporting him as he kissed him, in the Russian manner, three times.

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"Forgive me, O my angel," said Father Vadim, "Forgive me!"

The demon howled like a sick dog, and immediately new, powerful arms took Ariel from Father Vadim.

"Well done, Ariel," said the rescuing angel. Ariel caught a rather fuzzy glimpse of the burnished wings and the fiery eyes that were the trademark of archangels. "Just rest now. I'm afraid what the enemy told you is half-true — your next assignment will be even more difficult. But it won't be for a long time, believe me."

"Don't leave . . . my charge . . . unguarded," Ariel murmured.

"It's already arranged, Ariel," another angelic voice said, and Ariel found himself looking into a face framed by the simple white wings of a fellow guardian angel. "It's me, Shelumiel. I've had a year off, and can't wait to work again!"

"Shelumiel . . . sorry . . . about Tamara," Ariel whispered.

"But she's safe, Ariel, safe. It's been a rather puratorial year for her, but Hell had less of her than they thought. Rest well now!"

Ariel was beyond further speech, but it made no difference, as long as he knew Father Vadim was well guarded. He closed his eyes, letting himself be held by the archangel, whose wings buzzed like golden fans in preparation for departure to the celestial sphere.

Through the heavenly whirr, Ariel heard Andrei Skolopsky remark to his wife, "Poor Father, he is not right since his *Matushka* died."

"Da," Mrs. Skolopsky agreed. "Perhaps it was her he was forgiving, there."

"Nyet, nyet," said Andrei. "He was never angry with her in his life. But whoever it was, they are forgiven now." Ω

## OUR HERO BECOMES ENTANGLED WITH A BLOODSUCKER

'Twas her exotic eyes made him suspect.  
He looked for fangs, but that was a mistake,  
They turned to kissing; all night long they necked.  
So to protect (and keep her from infect-  
ing) him, he purchased garlic, cross and stake.

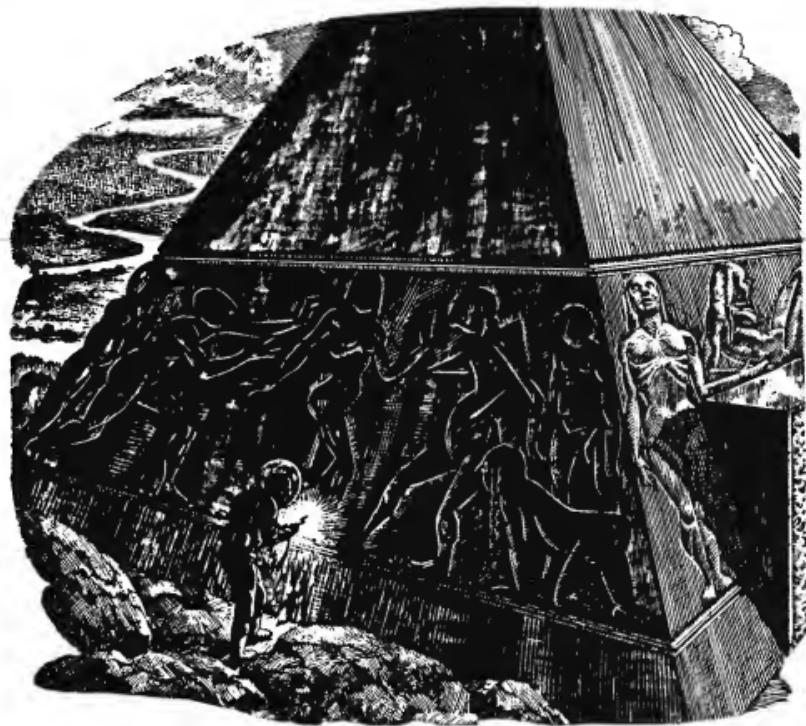
He added garlic to their evening stew.  
It didn't bother her, she stayed alive.  
Where he ate one huge bowl, she stuffed down two!  
When she was through she reached for him anew.  
He had to plead a headache to survive.

Next day Our Hero wore his cross of gold.  
It should have served to frighten her away,  
As he'd heard in the stories he'd been told.  
She grew more bold, kept trying for a hold;  
He squirmed in desperation all that day.

'Til finally he took his stake and cried,  
"Foul Vampire Beast, this is your final day!  
For I have lost much blood and should have died."  
Then deep inside her with his stake he tried  
To pierce her heart. She smiled, he heard her say,

"My kiss will only make you slightly sick,  
With the full moon, I'm Were — not Wolf, but Tick."

— John S. Davis



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